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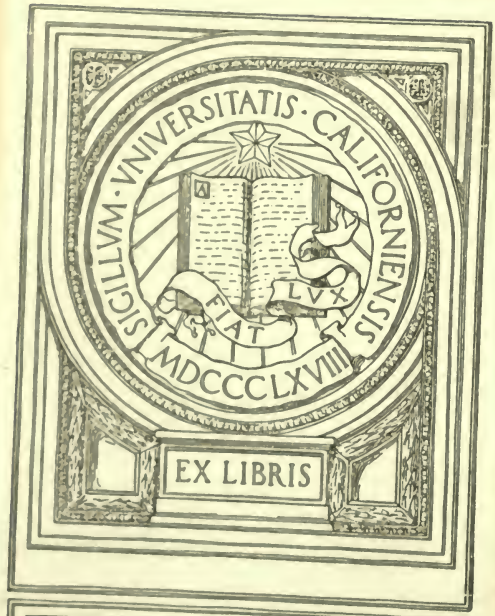
VICTOR OLLNEE'S DISCIPLINE

HAMLIN GARLAND



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VICTOR OLLNEE'S DISCIPLINE

BY

HAMLIN GARLAND

AUTHOR OF
"THE CAPTAIN OF THE GRAY-HORSE TROOP"
"MAIN-TRAVELLED ROADS" ETC.

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
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HAMLIN GARLAND

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UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

VICTOR OLLNEE'S DISCIPLINE

I

VICTOR READS THE FATEFUL STAR

SATURDAY had been a strenuous day for the baseball team of Winona University, and Victor Ollnee, its redoubtable catcher, slept late. Breakfast at the Beta Kappa Fraternity House on Sunday started without him, and Gilbert Frenson, who never played ball or tennis, and Arnold Macey, who was too effeminate to swing a bat, divided the Sunday morning *Star* between them.

"See here, Gil," called Macey, holding up an illustrated page, "do you suppose this woman is any relation to Vic?"

Frenson took the paper and glanced at it casually. It contained a full-page lurid article, printed in two colors, with the picture of a tall, serpentine, heavy-eyed, yet beautiful woman,

whose long arms (ending in claws) reached for the heart of a sleeping man. "What is it all about?" asked Frenson, as his eyes roamed over the text.

"It seems to be an attack on a medium named Ollnee who pretends to be able to bring the dead to life. According to this article, she's the limit as a fraud. You don't suppose— Ollnee is an unusual name—"

"Oh, not so very. I suppose it's another way of spelling Olney. I don't see any reason to connect old Vic with any such woman as that."

"No, only he's always been kind of secretive about his folks. You'll admit that. Why, we don't even know where he came from! Nobody does, unless you do."

Frensen dipped into the article. "Wow! this *is* a hot one! Lucile has a case for libel all right—unless the reporter happens to be telling the truth."

"Hello, Vic!" he shouted, as a tall, broad-shouldered, but rather lean young fellow entered the room. "Vic, you are discovered!"

"What's the excitement?" asked the newcomer.

"Here's an article in the Sunday paper you should see. It's all about a woman namesake of yours, a medium named Lucile Ollnee. The name is spelled exactly like yours. Say, old man, I didn't know you were the son of an 'infamous faker.' Why didn't you let us know." His tone was comic.

Young Ollnee took the paper quietly, but, as he read, a look of bewilderment came upon his face.

"How about it, Vic?" repeated Macey. "You seem to be hard hit. Is she an aunt or a sister?"

Rising abruptly, Victor left the room, taking the paper with him.

Macey uttered a word of astonishment, but Frensen, after a pause, said, soberly, "There's something doing here, Sissy. He didn't act a bit funny; but it's up to us to keep quiet till we know just where we stand. If that woman *is* related to Vic he's going to be fighting mad. I guess I'd better go up and see how he's taking it. He certainly did seem jolted." He turned to utter a warning. "Don't say anything to the other fellows till I come back."

Macey promised, and Frenson went up the stairs and into the little study which he and Victor shared in common. The windows were open and the bird-songs and the fragrance of a glorious May morning flooded the room with joy, but in the midst of its radiance young Ollnee sat, bent above the fateful printed page.

As Frenson entered he raised his head. "Have you read this thing, Frens?" he asked, tremulously.

"Part of it."

"Frens, Lucy Ollnee is my mother. This article is full of lies, but it's based on facts. I'd like to kill the man that wrote it," he added, savagely.

"Let me look at it again," said Frenson.

Victor handed the paper to him and sat in silence while Frenson went over the article with studious care. It was an exceedingly able and bitter presentation of the opposition side. It left no excuse, no palliation for a career such as that of Lucile Ollnee.

"She is fraudulent from beginning to end," the writer passionately declared. "From her heart outward she is as vile, as remorseless, as mysterious as a vampire. No one knows from what foul nest she sprang. She battens upon the sick, the world-weary, the sorrowing. Her hokus-pokus is so simple that it would deceive no one but those who are blinded by their own tears. She has just one human trait. She is said to be educating a son at an Eastern university on the profits of her vile trade. It is said that she is keeping him in ignorance of her way of life."

Frenson looked up at his friend. "Vic, what do you know of this business?"

"Almost nothing. I don't know very much of even my mother's relations. The first that I can remember is our home in La Crescent. My father's name was Paul Ollnee, but I can't remember him. He died before I was three years old. We left La Crescent when I was about eight and went to the city. I can't remember very much previous to that time, but after we moved to the city I know my mother set up her 'ghost-room' again."

"Ghost-room?"

"Yes, that's what I called it. I can't remember when there was not a 'ghost-room' in our house. As far back as when I was five years old we had it, and I was just getting old enough to wonder about it when we moved to the city."

"What kind of a den was this ghost-room?"

"It looked like any other bright and pretty room, but I never got more than a glimpse of it, for I was afraid of it. There was nice paper on the wall, I remember, and a desk with books, and there were some tall tin horns standing in the corner. Oh yes, and always an old walnut table. There's something queer about that. I don't understand why my mother should have taken that table down to the city with her, but she did. It was just an old, battered-up walnut stand, and yet she seemed to think the world of it. She put it in the center of her room in the city just as she used to have it in our old home. Oh, how I hated that room! There was something uncanny about it. There was always a string of strange men and women going into it with my mother, and I was always sent away to play when they came. Oh, Gil"—his voice broke—"she is a medium, but she's not the awful creature they make her out."

"Of course not. We all know how these things go."

"You see, I went away to boarding-school

when I was ten. This paper says I was sent away to keep me clear of the business that went on at home. I'm not sure but that is true, for I've seen very little of my mother's home life since."

"Didn't you visit her during vacations?"

"No, she always came to see me, and we took trips here and there. We'd go East, or to Colorado somewhere. Oh, we've had such splendid times together, Gil. She brought me presents and sent me money—" He looked out of the window for a few moments before he could go on. "And now— The other fellows will see that article, of course."

"Yes, the whole town will be reading it in an hour. However, they may not connect you with it."

"Oh yes, they will, and they'll believe every word of it, and they'll understand that I am Lucy Ollnee's son. This finishes me, Gil. Everybody will think I *knew* how my mother earned her money, and they'll despise me for taking it." He rose in an agony of shame. "I might as well be at the bottom of the lake."

"Don't take it so hard, old man. You're a big favorite here," said Frenson, with intent to offer consolation. "The work you've done on the team will go a long ways toward carrying you through this thing. Brace up; all is not lost."

The stricken youth was not listening. "Just think, Gil, she's been doing all this for me! I

knew she claimed to have messages, but I didn't know that I was living on money earned in that way. You see, we own some houses in La Crescent, and I just took it for granted that our living came from them." He was white with pain now. "This ends my career here. I've got to get out, and do it quick. I'll be the laughing stock of the whole town by noon."

Frenson, deeply sympathetic, did his best to minimize the effect of the disclosure, but with Victor's corroboration of the reporter's charges, he was forced to admit that Mrs. Ollnee was either an imposter or a woman of unsound mind. Little by little he drew from the stricken youth other interesting details.

"I remember having a fight with a city boy by the name of Barker," said Victor, "because he yelled at me 'sonova medium' till I stopped his mouth with my fist. It seems to me as if it were the very next day that my mother took me to Mirror Lake and put me in a boarding-school. That fight must have influenced her. Perhaps up to that moment our neighbors had let us alone. I can understand now why she always visited me and why she never offered to take me to the city."

He did not say that this very aloofness had made of her, to him, a serene and lofty figure, but so it was. She had come to him out of the unknown distance, a mysterious queen of the fairies, with something very sad and very sweet

in her face and something very appealing in her voice. There was nothing commonplace, nothing associated with toil or worry in his memory of her. Her broad, full brow, her deep-blue eyes, and her frail little body put her apart from other women. As he dwelt now on her dignity, her loving care, his heart grew strong with resolution. "Gilbert," he called, suddenly, "I'm going down there and defend her from those beasts."

Frenson was not surprised. "I reckon that's your little stunt," he retorted, student-fashion, but he was very much in earnest, nevertheless. "I'm wondering what old Boyden will say."

Victor believed in Professor Boyden and honored him, but at the moment the thought of facing him was painful. Boyden was one of those who tested the human soul with the electric bell, the clock, and the spymograph. Delusions were among his hobbies. Hysteria was a great word with him. Man lived among appearances. Personality was not a unit, but an aggregate, liable to disassociation, and the hysterical girl was capable of deceiving the very elect. To him, mediumship was merely the sign of immorality or epilepsy.

A part of this disrupting philosophy had entered Victor's head, and as he slowly and minutely re-read that cruel newspaper analysis of his sweet and gentle mother he was startled, but a little comforted by the thought that she might be the victim of her subconscious self,

"She can't mean to cheat. Of that I am certain. But she needs me just the same. I'm going to earn her living and mine in some honest way."

Two or three of his most intimate friends came up after breakfast and started in to chaff, but, being far past the stage of evasion, Victor frankly confessed his relationship to the medium and hotly defended her, ending by mournfully, declaring his intention of leaving school at once and forever.

Thereupon, his visitors also became very serious, perceiving the tumult of doubt and despair into which he had been thrown, and one by one they fell into awkward silence and slipped away, leaving him alone with Frenson, who had been giving the most careful thought to the whole situation.

"Of course the fellow who wrote this article had his own private grouch. Any one can see that. And your friends are not going to condemn your mother on what he says. But all the same, you're wound up pretty tight, Vic; there's no two ways about that. According to your own statement she does claim to hear voices, and she does claim to give messages from the dead. Now, I'm not saying all this is impossible, but you know as well as I do that Boyden and his kind say 'Nitsky' to the whole business."

"I don't care what she's done," retorted Victor; "she has stood by me like a brick all these

years, and now it's up to me to do something for her when she's in trouble."

Frenson admitted that this was a human and righteous resolution on the part of his chum and offered to help in any possible way.

Victor, too full of grief and despair to think clearly, went about his packing with swollen throat. There was keen pain in the thought of abandoning this bright room, of discarding all his trophies, books, and pictures, but this he did, putting nothing into his trunk but his clothing and a few photographs of his dearest girl friends. "What's the use?" he said to Frenson. "It's me to the spade or the ice-tongs, now. I won't need these things any more. It's battle in the arena of trade for Vic from this time on."

Frenson looked around at the little library. "Well, I'll hold them together for a while. Maybe you'll be able to come back and graduate, after all."

"Never! Don't you see I can't take another cent of my mother's money now that I know how it's earned?"

Frenson listened unexcitedly. "Well, now, suppose these voices should turn out to be real? Suppose these messages have been from the dead?"

"It wouldn't make any difference."

"Oh yes, it would. At least it would to me. Scientific men have been against a whole lot of things in the past that turned out to be true.

Natural selection, for instance, and X-rays and the wireless telephone."

"I see your drift, Gil. You want to be a comfort to me, but I've been digging down into my memory, and I know now that my mother has been trained into these habits, these delusions, for over twenty years. It won't be an easy thing to get her out of them. She is as much deceived as the rest. I am sure of that."

"Well, why don't you experiment with her? Make a test," suggested Frenson.

"Would you experiment with your own mother?" asked Victor.

"I'd make a case out of my grandmother if as much hinged on her as swings on this question of your mother's honesty. You can't blink these charges, Vic, they'll have to be met if she remains in the city."

Victor sat in silence for a few moments, then broke out again. "Gil, I begin to understand a hundred things that have always seemed queer to me. She has kept me away from her because she *knew* I would not sanction her way of earning money. Why, I haven't slept in her house but once since I was ten years old, and that was just before I entered here. I hated where she lived; it was a ratty little hole down on the south side, and the people with her were sloppy Sals. I refused to stay a second night. I can see it all now. She was living there in that way to save money for me, to keep me here,

She wanted me to have just as good a chance as any of the rest of you. This room, the clothes I have on, my trinkets, everything came from her, and now there's no telling what may happen to her. That article threatens all kinds of persecution. I ought to be there this minute. I must take the very next train."

"I guess you're right there, old man. It's likely to be a pretty exciting day for her. This article is apt to bring all kinds of trouble to her as well as to you."

The news that Victor Ollnee was the son of a notorious medium ran rapidly among his classmates, and while they honored him and prized his skill on the team, they felt a certain resentment toward him. Some of them thought he had not been quite honest with them, and a violent controversy was thundering in the dining-room as Frenson re-entered it at one o'clock. He took Victor's part, of course. "He can't help what his mother's done," he argued. "He didn't choose his mother. Why slam into Vic?"

"We aren't slamming into him. We're sorry for him," responded one of the fellows.

"But we don't see how we can afford to have him in the frat," said another. "He's a ripping good fellow and a wonder at the bat, but what can we do? He should have told us about himself. The paper here says that his mother makes a living by cheating people, by tapping spirit wires and blowing horns and hearing voices in

the dark: and all that shady business is sure to reflect on us. He's a marked man which ever way you look at it. You'll see everybody rubber-necking over our fence to-day. They've begun it already."

"That's so," agreed a third man. "Why didn't he tell us the truth before we voted him in here?"

Frenson explained. "He's been telling me all about it. He says he didn't know his mother was earning her money that way."

"That's the part that looks queer to us," accused the opposition. "How could he help knowing it? Looks to us as if he'd been covering it up all along. This writer says the woman is a regular 'battle-ax.'"

The current was setting strongly against Victor, and Frenson, seeing this, rose to go. "Well, there's no need of taking action. Poor Vic is heart-broken over the whole business and is leaving on the three-o'clock train."

This silenced even his critics. They began to remember what a jolly good fellow he was, and how important his work in "the diamond" had been. It was all very sad business, and they relented. "We don't want to be hard on him," they said.

Frenson went up to Victor. "See here, Captain, you must be hungry. I'll push a tray for you if you don't feel like going down among those 'Indians.' I'll have to be honest with you.

They're all up in the air down there and howling something fierce. I reckon I'd better hustle a turkey-leg for you."

"I wish you would, Gil. I can't bear to see any one but you. If I can, I want to sneak out and get to the train without catching anybody's eye. All I need now is to kill that reporter. He has smashed my world, sure thing, and I may find my poor little mother crushed under it, too." He tore the paper into little bits, snarling through his set teeth. "The fellows may believe what they please. I've done with them all. They're all against me but you, I can see that."

Frenson got out his pipe and filled it while his partner raged up and down the room. At last he said: "Now, Vickie, when you get calmed down you just remember that you've a lot of mighty good friends up here. There'll be dozens of them that this thing won't change a little bit. They'll talk, but they'll be sympathetic."

Victor's wrath burned itself out at last, and he consented to Frenson's bringing the tray of food. But he declined to go down-stairs till the time came to start for the train.

As they were crossing the hall they met little Macey, who, with a startled look in his eyes, intercepted Victor's passage. "I'm awfully sorry, Vic," he began. "I wish I could do something for you."

There was something so sincere and moving in his tone that Victor's stern mood melted. His voice grew husky as he tried to jocularly reply. "Never mind, Sissy, I'm down, but I'm not out. Good-by till next time."

"That's the spirit," cheered Frenson from the doorway.

Out on the walk a couple of the older fraternity men stood talking in low voices (of Victor, of course), and as they fell apart one of them had the grace to say: "Don't stay away too long, Vic. We'll need you Saturday."

Victor waved a hand. "I hope you'll be here when I return," he retorted; but as he entered the hack (which Frenson had provided, as though he were taking an invalid or a lady to the train) his composure utterly gave way. "I could have stood it if the boys hadn't welched," he sobbed. "But they did; you can't fool me. They threw me down hard."

"Some of them did," admitted Frenson. "But they were the hollow ones. The solid chaps are all right yet."

"I can't blame them very much. If they believe all that stuff about my mother and think that I knew it, why of course they're right in feeling as they do."

At the train the loyal Frenson said, "Well now, Vic, if you need help any time you let me know and I'll come galloping."

"That's real bold in you, Gil, and if I get where I can't see my way out I'll shout."

And so they parted—Victor with a feeling that their companionship was ended forever, Gilbert with a sense of having failed of his intent to comfort and sustain.

II

VICTOR INTERROGATES HIS MOTHER

ONCE on the train, with the towers of the university building out of sight, Victor's mind went forward toward the great city whereto he was now hurrying in the spirit of one about to enter a tiger-haunted jungle. Hitherto he had been unafraid of its tumult, for there his mother lived. Her home, vague of outline as it was, offered refuge from the thunder and the shouting. But now its shelter was worse than useless, for its lintel was marked with a sign of shame and terror, and this the law and the lawless knew equally well.

"How will she seem to me now," he asked himself. "What will she say to me when we meet?"

On one point he was sternly resolved. "She must leave the city at once. We will go West somewhere. I will earn our living now." And at the moment earning a living seemed easy.

The close of a beautiful spring day was spreading over the town as he made his way up the stairway into the unwonted silence of the

thoroughfare. The wind was from the east, clean and cool and sweet. As he looked down at the river from the bridge and marked its water flowing swiftly from the lake toward the splendid sunset sky he exulted over the power of man, of science, to reverse the natural current of a stream. "So must I change the whole course of my mother's life," he thought with returning resolution. "It must be done. It can be done. It's all in the will."

The hit-or-miss squalor of California Avenue filled him with renewed and augmented disgust as he descended from the car at the corner and began his search for his mother's apartment, which was the top story of a shabby wooden building standing between two shops. The stairway reeked with associations of poverty, a shifty poverty, and Victor's gorge rose at it. The second flight, though cleaner, was musty with decaying wood, and the doorway—on which a dim card was tacked—sadly needed paint. He began to realize sharply the sacrifices which had enabled him to live in the care-free comfort of his chapter-house, and his heart softened.

After knocking twice without obtaining a response he tried the knob. It yielded and he went in. All was silent and dim. For an instant he hesitated. "Perhaps I'm in the wrong pew after all," he thought; but as he looked about him he recognized the ghost-room furniture of his boyhood. On the wall was a familiar picture—the

crayon portrait of a black-whiskered man. The same old battered walnut table which he remembered so well occupied one corner, and behind it three long tin cones stood upright on their larger ends. He shivered with disgust at them and turned to the lounge, over which, scattered as if by a gale of wind, lay the leaves of the hated Sunday edition of the *Star*. All else was neat and tidy, though threadbare with use. It was, indeed, very far from being "the gilded den of vice" which the reporter had depicted.

Oppressed by the silence, Victor called out, "Mother, are you here?"

He thought he heard a voice, a husky whisper, say, "*Go to her*"; and, a little surprised by this, he stepped to the door of the bedroom and peered in. There, sitting in an arm-chair, half hid in the gloaming, sat his mother with closed eyes and a gray-white face.

"Mother, are you sick?" he cried out, starting toward her.

Again the whisper in the air close to his ear commanded him: "*Stay where you are. Do not touch her.*"

"Mother, don't you know me? It is Victor."

The whisper answered: "*Your mother is resting. We are treating her. Be patient; she will awaken soon.*"

For a moment Victor's heart failed him, so impressive was this whisper, issuing apparently from the empty air. Then a flood of rage swept

over him. This Voice was one of the tricks charged against her by the paper. "Mother, stop that! I won't have it. Do you hear me? Stop it, I say!"

The sleeper stirred and her eyes opened, but no sign of recognition was in them. Slowly her stiffened hands withdrew from the arms of her chair and clasped themselves in her lap. Her cheeks, puffed and pallid, were rigid and her eyes, turned upward and inward, gleamed coldly. The lids were half-closed. She had a horribly unfamiliar, tortured look, and he started toward her, calling upon her in a voice of anxiety. "Mother, what is the matter? Don't you hear me?"

At last she opened her eyes and a thrill of relief ran through him as he caught a gleam of recognition there. She lifted her hands feebly, whispering, "My boy, my precious boy!"

Kneeling by her side, he waited for her consciousness to come back. Her hands, so cold and nerveless, grew warmer, her lips smiled wearily, yet with divine maternal tenderness, and at last she spoke. "My big, splendid boy! I knew you would not desert me. I knew it; I knew it. I prayed for you."

"I came by the very first train," he answered, "and I am here to defend you."

A loud knocking at the door startled her and she clasped his hand tightly as she whispered: "That is another of my enemies. All day they have been coming. Send them away."

He put her hands down and rose tensely. "I'll smash their faces," he hotly declared.

"Don't be rash, Victor, please."

He strode to the door and opened it. A dark, handsome young woman and a grinning youth stood without. They were both a little dashed by Victor's appearance as he queried, with scowling brow, "What do you want?"

The man replied, "We came to have a sitting."

Victor exploded. "Get out," he shouted. "If you come back here again I'll throw you down the stairs." Thereupon he slammed the door in their faces and returned to his mother.

"We've got to get away from here," he said as he came to her. "We can't stay here another day."

"That must be as my guide, your grandfather, says," she replied.

"There's no use talking like that to me, mother. You've got to stop this business. I won't have any more of it. It's shameful, and I won't have it."

She answered, gently: "I'm under orders, Victor. I can do nothing in opposition to The Voices."

He bent over her with knitted brow. "See here, mother, I want you to understand that this medium business has got to be cut out. Look what it has let you in for! I don't believe in your Voices, and you must—"

She stopped him. "My son, if you do not

believe in The Voices you cannot believe in me. They are real. If they were not, I should go mad. They are in my ears all day long. My comfort is that they are not imaginary. Others hear them, and that proves to me that they are not an illusion. If you listen they will speak to you."

"I don't want them to speak to me. I want you to pack up—"

"Hark!" she commanded. "They are speaking now."

As he listened, the same measured whisper which he had heard upon entering the house made itself distinctly heard, apparently in the air, a little higher than his mother's head. "*Boy, trust in us!*"

Victor glanced at his mother's lips. He could not help it; base as it seemed, he suspected her of ventriloquism. "Who are you?" he asked.

"*Your grandsire, Nelson Blodgett.*"

This reply, apparently without his mother's agency, was uttered in so plain a tone that Victor's hair rose. He opened and peered into a little closet which stood behind his mother's chair. It was empty, and as he came slowly back and stood looking down into her face a low, breathy chuckle sounded in his ear.

"*A smart lad. Needs discipline.*"

A flush of rage passed over him, leaving him cold. He studied his mother in silence, convinced that she was cunningly playing upon his

fears. As he pondered she said, quietly: "I'm glad you came, Victor. You fill my heart with joy; but you must not stay. I do not need you. You must go back to your studies."

"That I cannot do."

"Oh, Victor, you must! I want you to graduate. Father insists on it."

"I tell you it is impossible. Do you suppose I'm going back there where all the fellows are laughing at me? Why, they're talking of throwing me out of the club! More than that, I can't take another cent of your money. If I had known how you were earning your living I would never have entered the university at all."

"Oh, my boy, do you doubt me? Do you believe what they say against me?"

This brought him face to face with the whole problem. "Of course I don't believe that you cheat—purposely—but I do think you are abnormal. You can't expect me to believe that a voice can come out of the air like that. It's impossible! It's against all reason, and yet—"

At this moment another knock, a gentler signal, sounded at the door, and the youth, relieved by the interruption, flared out at the unknown intruder. "Go away," he shouted.

"No, no; these are friends," his mother asserted, and rose to let them in.

Victor caught her by the arm. "What are you going to do?"

"Open the door. It is one of my dearest friends."

"You must not give a sitting. I won't have it."

The knock was repeated and she hurried away, leaving the boy confused, angry, and helpless.

She returned, accompanied by two women. The first of them was a diminutive, gray-haired lady, with a frank and smiling face, whose dress proclaimed a prosperous and happy station in life. Her companion was a tall young girl, whose spring suit, quiet in color and exquisitely tailored, became her notably. The youth thought, "What a stylish girl!" And the sight of her calmed him instantly.

"Victor," said his mother, and her tone was one of relief, "these are my dearest friends, Mrs. Joyce and Leonora Wood, her niece."

Victor bowed without speaking, for the heart of battle was still in him.

Mrs. Joyce cried out: "What a fine, big fellow! I didn't expect such a stalwart son."

"Please be seated," said Mrs. Ollnee. "My son has just arrived. He saw that dreadful article in the paper and came to defend me."

"That was fine of you," exclaimed Mrs. Joyce to Victor. "That same article brought us. I would have been here before only we don't take the *Star*, and I did not see the article until about an hour ago."

Mrs. Ollnee took up her explanation. "But,

Louise, Victor says he will not go back to college."

Mrs. Joyce was quick to apprehend the situation. "I suppose that outrageous article made it appear necessary for you to defend both your mother and yourself," she said, searchingly.

Victor was not disposed to gloze matters in the least. "It made a fool of me," he responded, bitterly. "It made it impossible for me to look my friends in the face. How could I convince them that I was not sharing in the profits of my mother's business? I told them I didn't know where my allowance came from, but of course no one believed me. I know now, and I despise the whole business. I've come down here to take my mother out of it."

The three women looked at one another sympathetically. Mrs. Joyce, who knew Mrs. Ollnee's history intimately, only smiled as she answered: "I don't see that you need to feel ashamed of your mother's profession. A medium is one of the most precious instruments in this world. She brings solace to many a sorrowing heart. Why is her work less honorable than singing, for example? Furthermore, no one is obliged to come to her. We sit of our own choice, and if we are not pleased we can refuse to pay, and we need not return. So you see it is a free contract, after all."

Her reasoning staggered Victor. He was confused also by her frank and charming manner.

He perceived that his problem was not so simple as he had imagined. Hitherto, his life had been single-hearted, with nothing more difficult to decide than a question of moral philosophy; but here, now, he stood confronted by an entirely baffling entanglement of human wills. This woman, so evidently of the higher world of wealth and culture, accepted his mother's claims, and this profoundly impressed him.

Mrs. Joyce continued. "Don't take this newspaper attack too seriously, Mr. Ollnee. It was meant to be nasty, and it *is* nasty; but it is not fatal. It is a cloud that will soon blow over and leave you and your mother unharmed."

"It will never blow over for me," he replied, passionately, "and you must not include me in this thing. I've lived a long way from it thus far, and I don't intend to mix up with this kind of hokus-pokus."

"Victor," called his mother, warningly.

He corrected himself. "Of course I don't accuse you of wilfully deceiving anybody. I'm willing to grant that you *think* these Voices are real; but my teacher, Doctor Boyden, says that mediumship is only a kind of hysteria—"

Mrs. Joyce laughed. "Yes, I've read Doctor Boyden's books. What does he know about it? Did he ever study a wonderful psychic like your mother? Has he candidly examined these phenomena? Never in his life! I know all about that kind of investigator. He is basing

his conclusions on somebody's else's conjectures or prejudices."

Victor defended his master. "He has tried to experiment. He's offered prizes for mediums to meet him, but they have refused. Not one would sit with him."

"Why should they? Would you have your mother seek him out to convince him? Why doesn't he come to her. There he sits in his chair, pretending to say that these phenomena are impossible, whereas I know, from many personal tests, that these voices are not merely real, but that they come from my dear ones on the other side and that they sustain and comfort me."

Victor was silenced, and his discomfiture was made the more complete by the smiling gaze of the young girl, who was evidently enjoying his perplexity. Nevertheless, though he did not continue the argument, he held to his opinion that they were all victims of his mother's unconscious necromancy.

Mrs. Joyce continued. "You say you know nothing about it. Why not find out something about it? Here is your mother. Study her."

"Why don't we have a sitting now?" exclaimed Miss Wood. "It would be fun to see his face when the horns began to dance about."

Mrs. Olnee looked a little worried. "Not now, Leo, I'm too upset. It's been a terrible day for me. I haven't eaten a thing."

Mrs. Joyce rose. "You poor dear! Let's go get something. Come this instant. You'll go, Mr. Ollnee."

His first impulse was to refuse, but as he studied his mother's pale face and thought of the good effect of the outside air he relented. "Yes, I'll go," he replied, ungraciously.

Miss Wood came over to him and tried to soften his mood. "I know how you feel about all this, and I know how brutal a scientific sharp can be. My professors were all against it. Just the same, it's a wonderful old world; a good deal more wonderful than some of our teachers admit."

He did not reply to this, but stood watching his mother as she put on her hat and wrap. Her whole expression had changed. Her face had lighted up and her delicacy of feature and small, graceful hands denoted to him as never before the woman of natural refinement and intelligence. It was hard to consider her at the moment the victim of a brain disorder, and yet—

Mrs. Joyce led the way down the creaking stairs, and Victor, following in sullen silence, was surprised and a little daunted to find a luxurious automobile waiting for them. He rebelled at the curb. "You go on without me," he said, harshly. "I'll stay here till you come back."

"Oh no," exclaimed Mrs. Joyce. "Please come with us. Your mother will not be happy without you."

Miss Wood remarked, humorously, "Never refuse a dinner or a ride in a motor-car; that's my motto."

His mother timidly lifted her face. "Victor, Mrs. Joyce is my most loyal friend. I owe her more than you know. I *wish* you would come."

He yielded with a sense of stepping down, but as he found himself seated beside Miss Wood and whirring swiftly up the street his inflexible attitude softened. "For this one night I will follow; after that I lead," he promised himself.

The girl mocked him with subtle intonation. "I am glad of any mystery and romance which remains in this old world, and I never quarrel with fate. If any one is disposed to exchange an autocar ride for so intangible a thing as a voice, I trade."

A little later she reverted to his problem. "What right have you to pass judgment on your mother without examining her? I was just as skeptical as you are when I met her first, but she *forced* me to believe. I am perfectly certain that she would upset Doctor Boyden. If he would come down quietly and sit with her she'd convince even him. She is a very dear little woman, and we all love her."

Mrs. Joyce leaned over and spoke in his ear. "It is only through devoted beings like your mother that the bereaved are assured of life everlasting. She doesn't *tell* me that my son is

living beyond the veil; *she brings him to me.* I hear his voice and touch his hand."

To this sort of thing he was forced to listen during their course down the shining avenue, and it made the whole city as unreal as a dream. When they rolled up to the wide portals of a towering hotel a new anxiety presented itself. "Suppose mother should be recognized as we enter? Suppose they arrest her here."

A realization of his own poverty and youth and general helplessness came over him with crushing effect as he trod the hall, which seemed very vast and splendid in his eyes. He was subdued, too, by the thought that he had not silver enough in his pocket to fee the girl who took their wraps. His resolution to fight, to earn not only his own living but to rescue his mother, became fainter each moment. "Can it be that yesterday I was behind the bat?" he asked himself. "Surely I must be dreaming."

He perceived another side to his mother's character. She seemed quite at ease amid all this splendor, and accepted whatever Mrs. Joyce did for her as something quite definitely her due.

There was no indication of the Sabbath in the gorgeous dining-room, and nothing to show that sorrow or poverty existed in the world; and seeing his mother's face flushed with pleasure, the perplexed youth relented a little further. "This one night she may have, but it must be the last of such entertainment on such terms."

There was in him beneath all this antagonism a kind of dignity and manly strength which pleased Mrs. Joyce. She was glad to see him lighten up, and she exerted herself to that end. "There now," she said, looking about the room. "Let's forget all of our troubles. Let us suppose that all our friends 'on the other side' are at dinner also."

Victor sat in silence what time his mother decided whether she would have asparagus soup or consommé. It was his first experience with that degree of wealth which takes no thought of price, and glancing at the figures on the bill of fare his hair rose. Never in his life had he eaten a meal which cost as much as this one order of soup, and the fact that his mother gaily ordered the best indicated to him how deeply indebted she already was to her patroness. "There must be some very definite need which she supplies," he conceded, "or Mrs. Joyce would not so gladly pay her bills."

At the same time his respect and admiration for his mother returned. As the dinner went on her cheeks glowed with faint color. Her years of trouble seemed to slip away from her. She took on youthful grace and charm, glancing often at her handsome son with eyes of maternal pride and content. "It is so good to have you here," she silently expressed. He had never seen this care-free side of her, and the gayer she grew the more alien, in a sense, she became. She was

instinctively the lady, of that he was assured, and though she could not follow Miss Wood in all of her flights of fancy and allusion, she plainly showed unusual powers of appreciation.

The talk also brought out the extraordinary intimacy of the three women. It appeared that Mrs. Joyce and Mrs. Ollnee were inseparable, that she often took his mother to the opera and to the theater, and as they discussed various singers and actors, whose names alone he knew, his sense of being suburban deepened. "Why does this vivid and cultured woman seek my mother's society? For what reason does she lavish money upon her? Is it because of her personal charm? No," he decided, "that cannot be the reason." Beneath her cordial tone he thought he detected the reserve of one who is being kind to a dependent. "She's being nice to mother," he concluded, "because she thinks she's getting something special from her. Mother is a freak, not a friend. She considers her a kind of spiritual telephone."

Although Miss Wood devoted herself to the task of amusing him, and his face lost some of its gravest lines, yet he could not be denoted a careless youth, even when the wine came on. He was thinking too deeply to be outwardly ready of retort. It was too sudden a change from the pastoral air and quiet streets of Winona to be instantly assimilated. He remained sullen.

His mother eyed him apprehensively but ad-

miringly. "He looks like his father," she whispered to Mrs. Joyce.

He would have been inhuman had he not responded to certain charms in Miss Wood. She had a fine profile, he admitted, finer than that of any girl he knew. Her eyes, too, were a little disturbing by reason of the small wrinkles of laughter at the corners, but she irritated him. She was perfectly sure of herself. Nothing that he did or failed to do affected her in any other way apparently than to deepen her amusement. Her manner seemed to say, "Wait a few days and see what a fool you'll find yourself out to be. You're nothing but a great big country lad, trying to be a philosopher, trying to live up to a rigid code of morals. It's all a pose, a ludicrous attitude of boyish defiance."

She said nothing of this of course; on the contrary, she talked of things in which he was interested, trying politely to meet him half way. She was actually a year or two younger than he, but she gave off the air of being five years older. She had explored immense tracts of human life, or at least of social life, of which he had no knowledge, and this came out in her casual references to New York and Paris. Her home was in Los Angeles, but she was now staying with her aunt.

He lost his sullen reserve. The soup, the wine, the bird, and the maid softened his stern mood. By the time the coffee came on he was talking

almost boyishly with his hostess and his face had lost its troubled lines.

His perplexities came back as Mrs. Joyce passed two bills to the waiter in payment for their dinner, and he watched from the corner of his eye to see how much change came back. Two dollars! Eighteen dollars for four dinners! "Great Scot!" he inwardly groaned. "It would take me a week to earn our share of this meal!" And a returning sense of his mother's subconscious iniquity reclad him with gloom.

The ride back to California Avenue was less festive, for Mrs. Joyce took occasion to say: "My advice is this. Return to college and obtain your degree. I will take care of your dear little mother."

"I can't do that," he said. "I've quit. There is no use talking about that."

"You shouldn't take this newspaper attack too seriously," remarked Miss Wood. "Reporters are always exposing mediums. It is quite habitual with them, and besides, your mother has been through it before."

"Is that true?" he asked, with sharpened assault.

"Yes," Mrs. Ollnee admitted. "I've been attacked in this way twice."

"Since I have been grown up?"

"Yes; once since you went to Winona."

"I didn't know that. Why didn't you tell me?"

Mrs. Joyce interposed. "What was the use? You could have done nothing. We who understand these matters make allowances for the reporter's trade. He must earn a living some way."

As she said this Victor recalled the cynical close of the article. "Probably the true-blue believer will condemn the detective and not the culprit," the lines ran. "There are dupes so purblind, so infatuated that nothing, not even the boldest chicanery can shake their faith; nevertheless, a few will take this article for what it is, a full and clear exposé of a shrewd and conscienceless trickster." And yet, as he faced these intelligent women, Victor could not think of them as being deceived by open chicanery, much less could he admit for a moment that his mother was capable of resorting to it.

It was a dramatic and moving experience for him to go from this cushioned, splendid chariot back to the shabby little apartment which was the only home in the wide world for either his mother or himself. He was filled with a kind of rage at her, at fate, and at himself, and no sooner were they inside the door than he turned upon her with a note of resentful resolution in his voice.

"Mother, how could you let me in for all of this? Why did you send me to college, knowing that sooner or later exposure must come?"

"I trusted the voices," she replied, "just as I must continue to trust them in the future."

"Now, mother," he rejoined with a certain foreboding grimness of inflection, "we've got to get right down to brass tacks on that business. I can't go on any longer in ignorance of who I am and what you are. I want to know all about you and all about my father. Who was my father? What was he? Did he believe in this thing?"

Her eyes fell. "No, not while he was on this life's plane. Indeed, it was my 'work' that—that separated us. He hated it and was very harsh about it. But the first thing he did after he passed on was to come back and tell me that I was right after all. He asked me to forgive him."

"Is that his picture up there on the wall? What did he do for a living?"

"He was a really fine mind, Victor; one of those men who might have been eminent had they gone out into the world. He was a student and a thinker, but he was not ambitious. He was content to be the principal of a village school and live quietly; and we were very happy till The Voices began."

"Did he know you had The Voices when he married you?"

"Yes, I told him all about them, but he only laughed at me. I suppose he thought it was just a fancy on my part. Anyhow, he did not take them seriously, and during our courtship they gave me freedom. My guide said I need not sit

for a while and father guarded me from all the evil ones on that side who are so ready to rush in and take possession of a medium. For two years I had no touch of 'the power,' and I really thought it had all gone away from me. Then you came and I was very ill, and father, my control, returned to tell me that you would be a great man. 'Hereafter,' he said, 'I will direct you in the education of your son.' Why, Victor, he named you. He said you should be called Victor because you would overcome all opposition."

"Well, just how did your separation come about?"

"When my control began to demand things from me your father accused me of playing tricks and sternly forbade any more of it. I tried not to go into trance. I fought 'the power' and this angered father. He came upon me so strong that I could do nothing with him. I heard The Voices all the time and your father thought me crazy. I had what seemed like epileptic fits. I seemed to lose my identity—but I didn't; I knew all that was going on. It seemed as if I went out of my body while others entered it and used it to torment and perplex your father. Then he became convinced that I was abnormal in some way and experimented with me—all in a very skeptical spirit—and gradually he lost his regard for me. I became only 'a case of hysteria' to him. I could see him

change from day to day. He grew colder and more critical and more aloof all the time. This made me so ill that I was unable to keep my feet —I grew old rapidly, and another younger and prettier woman, one of his teachers, gained the love I had lost and at last he went away with her."

There was a little silence before Victor was able to ask, "Where did he go?"

"He went to Denver, and I never saw him again. He died not long after."

"Then did you take to making a living out of the ghost-room?"

"After your father left I asked my guides why they permitted him to leave me, and they said it was considered necessary to keep me in 'the work.' 'You were too happy,' they said. 'You are too valuable an instrument to live out your life simply as wife and mother. You are now to be devoted to higher aims.' Since then whenever I have tried to get out of 'the work' they have brought me back. Oh, you don't know what a clutch they have on me. They know my income to a dollar. They let me have just enough to live on and to educate you, but they won't let my rich friends provide me with an income. I must do their will exactly or they punish me."

As she enlarged upon this phase of her life Victor was appalled by it. Her madness—and madness it seemed to him—was now a settled

and specific part of her life. "How do they punish you?" he asked, after a pause.

"They do not hesitate to throw me into convulsions, or make me do things that rob me of my friends. They bring disaster upon me whenever I try to walk my own road. Every investment I make on my own judgment they defeat. Did you ever plague an ant or a bug by putting something in its way, checking its advance, no matter in which direction it went?"

He nodded. "Yes, I've done that as a boy."

"Well, that is exactly how they treat me. I've given up trying to do anything in opposition to their wishes. I do the work that is laid out for me." She sighed. "Yes, I've ceased to rebel. I am resigned. But, Victor, you must not fail me. I shall be perfectly happy if only you will be content to go with me and to grant at least that the work I am doing is worth while. You're all I have now, and when I see you frowning at me, so like your father, I am scared. That black look is on your face this moment."

"You need not be afraid of me, mother," he replied, wearily; "but you must not ask me to believe in your voices and all the rest of it. It's too unnatural and too foolish. But you're my good little mother all the same. and I'm not going to desert you. I'm going to stay right here and help you fight it out."

She took his words to mean something sweet and filial and went to his arms with happiness.

As she lifted her head from his shoulder he looked round the room and said, "But, mother, this ghost-room has got to go."

"Oh, Victor, don't say that. I am ready to promise not to take money for my work, but I can't promise anything further; and as for my ghost-room, as you call it, it has so many associations with Paul and your grandfather that I cannot think of giving it up. I dare not give it up."

"You must quit it," he repeated. "If you give another séance—for money—I will leave you and I will never come back." And on his face was the stubborn look of his father.

III

VICTOR MAKES A TEST

THAT night was a long and restless one for the mother, but the son, with the healthy boy's power of forgetfulness, slept dreamlessly, waking only when the morning light struck beneath his eyelids. For a moment the thunder of the elevated trains in the alley puzzled him, and he rose dazedly on his elbow expecting to catch Frenson at some practical joke, but as his eyes took in the faded carpet, the cheap curtains, the decrepit furniture, his brain cleared and his beleaguering worries came back upon him like a swarm of vultures.

He recalled the terror of his mother's trance, the coming of her lovely friends, the ride, the luxurious dinner, and, last of all, the significant words with which they had parted.

In the light of the day his situation did not seem so complicated. "We must leave this city and go out West somewhere—get shut of the whole bunch. Father was right—this trance business is intolerable."

His natural vigor and decision returned to him.

He rose with a bound, calling to his mother with a realization of the fact that she had no cook. "Who gets breakfast, you or I?"

She replied, with a little flutter of dismay in her voice, "I don't believe there is a crumb of bread in the house."

"Never mind," he replied; "I'll go to the corner and negotiate a roll."

The neighborhood did not improve with daylight acquaintance, and on his way back from the shop with a jug of cream and a paper bag in his hands he dwelt again upon his motor-car ride to the Palace Hotel and reviewed the eighteen-dollar meal they had eaten. He possessed sufficient sense of humor to grin as he clutched his parcels. "If Miss Wood were to see me now she'd experience a jolt."

His smile did not last long. "Mrs. Joyce knows all about us," he admitted. "That's why she blew us to that feast. She was trying to compensate mother for her empty cupboard, which was very nice of her." Then his thought went deeper. He began to understand that it was to provide him with a larger allowance that his mother had been living alone and doing her own work. "Dear little mutter!" he said, and his heart softened toward her. "She's been walking the tight-rope, all right."

She was up and at work in the tiny kitchen as he came in. "I forgot to get my supplies Saturday—and yesterday I was so upset—"

"Never mind," he replied, gaily. "The 'royal gorge' we had last night makes breakfast supererogatory. I've attached some rolls and a bottle of cream, and if you've any coffee and sugar we're fixed."

"I have sugar but no coffee. I drink—"

"Not on your life!" he cut in. "No burnt wheat for me!" And he tore down the stairs like mad.

At the shop he found himself possessed of just seventeen cents, with which he bought a half-pound of coffee.

"Now I can begin my conquest of the world as all the great men have done—penniless. It's me for a stroll down-town, I reckon."

The table was neatly set when he returned, and his mother, proud of her big and glowing boy, cheerily confronted him. "No matter how poor we are," she said, "we can be happy." And with her faith renewed she prepared the coffee for the cream.

The sun struck into the bare little dining-room with golden charm, but these two souls, so alike yet so unlike, faced each other with returning constraint. As they talked their antagonism of purpose again developed.

Victor outlined his plan of going West and starting anew. To this suggestion his mother listened, then gently replied: "There are many objections to that, Victor. First of all, I have no money."

"Can't we sell something?" She shook her head, and he, after looking around, ruefully admitted that there was nothing to sell. "But your house—" This gave him a thought. "Why don't we go back to La Crescent? I'll work on a farm, in a grocery—anything rather than have you keep on with this business. It's dangerous, and it isn't nice."

"Victor," she began, with more of self-assertion than she had hitherto voiced, "you don't understand. My mediumship is not a business, it is a sacred obligation. God has gifted me with the power of communicating with those who have passed to a higher plane, and I must respect that gift. I am in the hands of those wiser than either of us. To oppose them would be self-destruction."

He listened with growing coldness and hardness. "That's all a delusion," he repeated. "Modern science has proved that mediumship is just plain hysteria."

"We won't argue," she replied, and her tone was that of one hurt. "I *know*, for I have had the personal experience. I am only a leaf in the wind when this power sweeps over me. So long as I live I must remain the instrument of these our supernal friends—it is my work in the world, and I must execute it."

"What do you expect me to do?" he asked, almost brutally.

"I'd like you to go back to your studies—"

"That I will not do," he assured her in tones that expressed a final decision.

"Well then—will you remain here with me?"

"Not with you carrying on the business which I hate."

"Why should you hate it? To Leo and Mrs. Joyce my mission is noble."

"I hate it because I think it's foolish, unnatural, and false. I don't mean that you *consciously* cheat, mother, but I am certain that in some way it all comes down to that."

She opened her arms in a gesture of passionate appeal. "My son, these Voices have educated you—they have helped me to feed and clothe you. Now here I am, prove me, try me, convict me if you can. I yield myself to your tests. I *know* the spirit life is a reality. If I did not I should perish with despair. Every day, almost all hours of the day, these Voices whisper in my ears. The hands of those you call the dead caress my cheek. They cheer and admonish me. They are as real to me as you are. If you can silence them, do so. I put myself into your hands. Do what you will in proof of my powers."

The boy was rapidly changing to the man. His mother's words beating upon his brain aroused something in him which he had not hitherto acknowledged. He thought deeply as he peered into her eyes, burning with resolution.

"She is honest—but she is the victim of a fixed idea." He had heard much of "the fixed

idea." "I will try her, I will rid her of her obsession." Aloud he said: "The important thing is our living. How am I to pay my way? I haven't a cent. I paid out my last penny for this coffee."

"I have a little money."

"I told you I wouldn't take another dollar of your money, and I won't," he replied, sharply. "That's settled. I must get clear and keep clear of all this 'bunk.'"

"But suppose you find my powers real?" she asked, trembling with eagerness.

He hesitated. "Then—well—if I believed in your powers I would still object to your earning money with—by means of your—your Voices. I've got to make my own way in the world, and from this moment!"

She read an unmitigable opposition in his eyes and sadly said, "You'll come here to sleep, won't you?"

He conceded so much, though reluctantly. "Yes, I'll sleep here, but as soon as I make a raise of any work I intend to pay for my board. As for carfare, I guess my junk will have to go into 'hock.'" He rose. "You see, I won a silver mug and a watch by being useful to the team. It's them to 'Uncle Jake's,'" he ended, with a return to the college youth's vocabulary, and going to his valise took out his reward for muscular merit and showed it to her. "Isn't that smooth?"

Her eyes shone with pride. "How much do you suppose you can borrow on it?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Five dollars, maybe."

"Well, I'll lend you ten dollars on it."

He looked at her with musing eyes. "Say twenty, and you may have both mug and watch."

She went to her purse and handed to him the money.

He took it without hesitation. "Well, here's where I hit the pavement for a job."

She confronted him in a final appeal. "Oh, Victor, I can't bear to have you doubt me even for an hour. Stay with me to-day. Stay and let me talk with you. I've had so little of you. Just think! for more than twelve years I've kept you away from me—I've starved myself—my mother-self—in order that you might grow to manhood untroubled by my faith, and I can't bear to have you doubt me now."

He understood something of her emotion and responded to it. "You dear, faithful little mother, I realize now what I have cost you, and I'm grateful; but that's the very reason why I can't let you do any more of it. I must begin to pay you back."

"All you need to do to pay me is to let me look at you," she fondly replied. "I'm proud of you, Victor. I was proud of you last night. I saw Leo admiring you, and Mrs. Joyce thinks you are splendid."

He was interested. "By the way, who is Miss Wood?"

"She's a niece of Mrs. Joyce. Mrs. Joyce is the widow of Joyce the lumberman."

"She seems to have all kinds of money." His face was thoughtful again.

"Yes, she's rich, and she has been very kind to me. She took me to California and to Europe. She is always doing things for me. It was just like her to come to me yesterday—she is not one to fail in time of trouble. I don't know what I should do without her."

"She certainly is nice. What about Miss Wood? Does she believe in your—your Voices?" He asked this without direct glance.

"Yes. She doesn't say much, but she is deeply grateful to my guides."

"She's no ordinary girl, I can see that. Is she rich also?"

"Not as Mrs. Joyce is rich, but The Voices have sort of adopted her. They say they will make her wealthy as a queen."

"What do you mean by that?"

"They are telling her from week to week just how to invest her money."

"Do you mean to tell me that *you* advise her how to invest her money?"

"No, I mean *The Voices* advise her."

"Why should 'they' know anything about business?"

She became evasive. "They do! They've

proved it again and again. Mrs. Joyce's income has doubled in five years by following father's advice."

He pondered on this deeply. "I don't like that. I don't see why you or your Voices should be valuable in that way."

"There are many things in this world for you to learn, my son," she replied with an assumption of superior wisdom.

This nettled him. "It don't take much wisdom to know that if you go on advising people in that way you'll get into trouble. That's what that writer said in the paper."

She closed her lips tightly as if to keep back a cutting reply, and he rose briskly. "Well, see here, we must put away these dishes."

She acquiesced in his postponement of the discussion, and helped him wash the dishes and set the room to rights. At last she said: "Where is the morning *Star?* Have you seen it?"

"There's a paper at the foot of the stairs; is that yours?"

"Yes," she replied.

"I'll get it," he said, and was out of the door and back again before she fully realized that he was gone. He opened the twist of damp paper with haste, fully expecting to find some new attack on "Mrs. Ollnee, the Blood-sucker," but there was nothing. "All the same, you're not safe in this house," he said. "They threatened

to arrest you, and I don't like to leave you here alone to-day."

"You need not worry about me," she replied, quietly. "Father will take care of me. If he saw any real danger coming my way he would warn me of it."

"He didn't warn you of the coming of the reporter, did he?"

"No—he had some reason for permitting this cloud to come upon me. He knows best."

"I don't believe I'd put very much faith in 'guides' that didn't keep me out of trouble."

"Perhaps all this is a part of our discipline. They are wiser than we. I accept even this disgrace as a good in disguise. Perhaps it was all intended to bring you to me."

The youth sank back again baffled by this all-inclosing acceptance. "What do you intend to do to-day?" he asked, as she rose and walked over to the little walnut table.

"I am going to ask for advice."

"Now?"

"Yes; and I wish you would sit with me for a few moments and see if we cannot secure direction for the day."

He was beginning to be curious—and his desire to dig deeper into his mother's brain overcame part of his repugnance.

"All right," he boyishly answered, but his heart contracted with sudden fear of finding her false. "Let's see what they're up to."

"Take a seat opposite me," she said, and there was something commanding in her voice.

Drawing a chair up to the old brown table—which he remembered as one of the pieces of furniture in his earliest childhood home—he took a seat.

"Why do you keep this rickety old thing?" he asked, shaking it viciously.

"It was your grandfather's reading-table, and he likes me to keep it. Besides, it is highly magnetized and very sensitive."

"Oh rats!" he irreverently burst forth. "You can't magnetize a piece of wood. Wood is a non-conductor. You can't subvert a physical law just by saying so."

"I don't mean it in that crude sense," she replied, quite mistress of herself. She had taken up and was holding between her hands a small hinged slate.

"What's that for?" asked Victor.

"To vitalize the surface. I am able to give it vitality by my touch." She laid the slate upon the table and placed her spread hand upon it. "Put your hand upon mine, Victor."

He did as she bade him, rebelling at the childish folly of it all. "What do you expect to do?" he asked.

Almost immediately the slate seemed seized by a powerful hand. It began to slide back and forth across the table violently, twisting and clattering. The youth put forth his own great

strength and stopped it, but a crunching sound announced that the slate was broken.

His mother said, sharply, "You mustn't do that, Victor." She took up the slate and showed one corner crushed and crumbled. "You can't hold it—you mustn't try—it angers them."

He marveled at the strength which had resisted him, but argued that his mother from long practice had become very muscular. Hysterical people often displayed astounding power.

After preparing a new slate she put it on the table as before, saying to the air, "Please don't be rough, father—Victor can't prevent his skepticism."

Three loud raps answered, and she smiled. He says, "All right. He understands."

"Seems to me he's mighty touchy for one on the heavenly plane," Victor retorted, maliciously. "Seems to me an all-seeing spirit ought to get my point of view."

A vigorous tapping on the table responded to this speech.

"What's that?" asked Victor.

"That is your father saying yes, he *does* get your point of view."

Victor had a feeling that his mother was receding from him as he faced her across the table. She became the professional medium in her manner and tone. He, too, changed. He hardened, assuming the attitude of the scientific observer—hostile and derisive. His keen hazel-gray eyes

grew penetrating and his lips curled in scorn. His tone hurt her, but she persisted in her sitting, and at last the slate began to tremble throughout all its parts, and a grating sound like slow writing with a pencil went on beneath it. Victor could plainly follow the dotting of the i's and the crossing of the t's, till at the end a tapping indicated that it was finished.

"You may take the slate, Victor," said Mrs. Ollnee.

He took it from the table and opened it. On one side, in bold script—a bit old-fashioned—stood these words: "*Stay where you are. Let the boy adventure into the city. Await results. I will be near. FATHER.*"

Victor, astounded, mystified, confronted his mother with wide eyes. "Now, what does that mean?"

"It means that I am to keep this house just as it is and you are to seek work in the city. Is that right, Paul?"

Three taps made answer.

The youth was stunned by the boldness and cleverness of all this. He was pained, too. He perceived no sign of abnormal thinking in his mother's action. She was not hysterical *She was not entranced.* Whatever she did she did consciously—and the thought that she could deliberately deceive him was shocking. He breathed quickly and a nervous clutch came into his hands. He resented being fooled. "Let's

try that again," he said; and his tone was precisely that of the child who sees a grown person swallow a coin and take it out of his ear. He was angry as well as sad. "Don't put your hand on it," he protested. "I don't like the looks of that."

She submitted, and then as he was putting it down on the table the sound of writing was heard within it. He laid his hand on the slates, and still the writing went on! With amazement he realized that both her hands were in sight and in no wise concerned in the writing. The right rested lightly and quietly on the frame of the slate, but the left, which lay on the opposite corner of the table, was quivering throughout all its minute muscles.

Amazed beyond words, excited, breathing deep, with a shudder of nervous excitement running over his entire body, Victor listened to the mystic pencil. "How *do* you work that?" he asked, in a whisper.

"I don't know. I have nothing to do with it," she answered; and taking the upper hinge of the slate between her fingers and thumb she slowly raised it.

And still the writing went on!

Victor, holding his breath in awe, bent to look within, but as the opening grew wider the writing stopped.

He snatched the slates from the table and studied the lines, which were made up of minute

dots. It was all perfectly legible: "*Son. I doubted. Now I know.*"

Victor sank back into his seat and stared speechlessly at the slate and the table. The problem of his mother's mediumship had taken on new elements of mystery. This physical test brought it into the range of his knowledge and interest. It was no longer a question of her honesty or sanity, it had become a problem in dynamics.

How was that bit of pencil moved? The messages he ignored—they didn't matter—but the method of their production seemed to eliminate all trickery, conscious or unconscious. Why did his mother's left hand quiver—and how could that writing shape itself?

His voice was husky with emotion as he said: "Mother, I don't understand that. You've got to tell me how that is done."

She felt the desperate resolution in his voice and she solemnly answered, "My son, I don't *know* how it is done."

"But you *must* know! Who moves that pencil! Your hand quivered all the time."

"Yes, I seem to have some physical connection with it—at times. Other times all that takes place has no more connection with me than the sunlight on the floor. The world is a very mysterious place to me, Victor. I don't pretend to know anything. I do as I am told."

He fell silent again while his mind reviewed

the entire process. Then he burst out, vehemently, on a new line. "I can't believe my eyes. You've hypnotized me. Mother, for God's sake don't juggle with me—don't play tricks with me. I won't stand for it. It hurts me—" He paused, confused, baffled, ready to weep.

"Can you, my own son, accuse me of trickery?" she asked.

"You *think* you're honest, mother—but don't you see you've become an *unconscious hypnotist?* It's your subconscious self deceiving us both. I don't know how you do it, but I know it must be a fraud."

"Victor," she said, solemnly, "what this power is you shall have full opportunity to determine, but I say to you that for more than twenty years I've been guided by these unseen presences. I've tested their wisdom and lived under their care. So far as this message is concerned I accept it. I was confused and frightened yesterday, but this morning I am calm. I shall do as they bid. I shall stay here while you go down into the city and see what you can find to do, and together we will test these voices."

There was a ring of new-found decision in her tone that quite dashed him. He sat dumbly facing her, helpless in a whirl of mental storm. "Is she more cunning than I thought? Is she playing a more complex game than appears?" These thoughts vaguely shaped themselves. Then his filial self answered: "But what has she

to gain? She loves me. She has sacrificed herself to keep me at school—why should she deceive me?"

Here again a third conception came to embitter him. He spoke. "You don't seem to mind my loss of a degree?"

"Yes, I do, Victor. I feel that very deeply, but the higher wisdom of your grandfather resigns me. I cannot tell what is behind it. By his power to read the future he may be preventing some terrible accident, some calamity by fire or water—I have an impression that it is something of that sort."

"*No*," came a whisper from the air.

She turned her face upward, and, listening intently, asked, "What *is* the reason, father?"

"*Discipline*," the whisper replied.

"He says 'discipline,' Victor."

"Discipline!" he echoed. "Why should I be disciplined? What have I done?"

"*It is not what you've done—it's what you are to do.*"

The Voice did not reply to further questions, and the silence gave out a kind of cold contempt, which cut the boy as he waited.

"Let's try that slate business again," he said at last. But to this his mother would not consent.

"It's of no use," she said. "They are gone. There is no 'power' present."

He again faced her with alien, accusing eyes. "When will you try this again?"

"To-night, when you come home."

"Home!" he sneered, looking about. "Do you expect me to call this place home? Do you expect me to hang about this scrubby hole to be disciplined by your Voices?"

The sound of a knock at the door gave her a moment's respite. "The postman," she explained as she rose to go to the door.

She was gone for several minutes and Victor heard her in friendly conversation with a pleasant male voice. Some way this added to his anger and disgust.

She came back with a letter in her hand which she began at once to open. "It is from Louise, I mean Mrs. Joyce."

She read it through with smiling face, then said, "Victor, you must be nice to Louise, she has done *everything* for us."

This brought him to his feet. "I understand all that now. It is *her* money I've been living on—I won't touch another cent that comes from her. Understand that! I won't eat another dinner that she pays for."

"Why, Victor, you should not feel that way! What has she done to make you bitter?"

"Nothing. I refuse to live on her charity, that's all, and I want you to find out just how much I owe her—how much *you* owe her—for I intend to pay her back every dollar with interest."

"But she considers I've already paid her.

She feels that I have always given her bounteous return for all her aid."

"I don't figure it that way," he said. "She's just amusing herself—"

She interrupted. "Listen to what she says." She read: "'I want to tell you how much I like your son. He is so vivid and so powerful. I'm sorry he is to miss his degree. Can't you persuade him to go back? I'll be glad to advance what is necessary—'"

"There it is, you see! There's the rich lady helping a poor relation."

"Wait, son!" she pleaded, and read on. "'I feel that I owe you ten times what you've permitted me to do for you.'"

"That's all very nice of her, mother, but I won't have any more of it." He pounded out the sentence with his fist.

She looked up at him with mingled fear and pride. "You are exactly like your father as you say that," she declared. "Oh, Victor, my son! If *you* leave me in anger I shall be desolate indeed. I can't live without you. Please believe in me—and love me—for you're all I have on this earth."

His anger died away. He saw her again as she really was, a pale, devoted little saint, with troubled brow and quivering lips, one who had shed her very life-blood for him—to doubt her became a monstrous cruelty.

He put his arms about her and hugged her

close. "I didn't mean to hurt you, mother—but your world is so strange to me. I'll stay, I'll do the best I can here; only don't work this slate trick any more. Don't sit for any one but me. Will you promise that?"

"May I not sit for Louise?"

"Not without me."

"I dare not promise, Victor. Father may insist. If he does *not* insist I will do as you wish. I will give it up."

He kissed her. "Dear little mother, you sha'n't live alone any more, and you shall soon have a home that is worthy of you."

She was weeping, and a big lump in his own throat made speech difficult. To cover his emotion he slangily said: "Well, now, it's me to the marts of trade. Perhaps I'll fool The Voices yet."

IV

VICTOR THROWS DOWN THE ALTAR

"HOW do people get jobs," he asked himself as he set forth. "'Want ads,' I suppose." He went deeper. "What am I fitted for? I can keep books—in a fashion—or I can clerk. My training has not fitted me for any special thing, unless to sell sporting-goods." This was a "lead," and his face brightened. "My work on the team ought to help me in that direction. Good idea! I'll hie me to the sporting-goods houses."

The first two managers with whom he talked, while much impressed by him, were completely manned, but the third was disposed to consider him till he told him his name. "No relation to Mrs. Ollnee, the medium?" he asked, with a grin, while poising his pencil to write.

For an instant Victor hesitated, then took the leap. "Well, yes, I am, but then you don't want to believe that report; it's more than half a lie."

The manager's smile vanished. He left the address half finished. "So you are the son they spoke of?" he said, with a cold, keen glance.

"Yes, I am," Victor boldly answered.

He closed his book. "I don't believe we can trade," he announced. "Of course *I* don't consider all mediums frauds and liars, but this house is very particular about its help—"

Victor turned and walked away, bitterly rebellious of soul and disheartened. For a time his anger burned so hotly within him that he meditated taking the train and leaving the city and all it held behind him. Again and again his thought returned to the picture his gentle little mother had made as she had said good-by to him at the head of the stairs. To accuse her of conscious deception was like accusing a sweet girl of infanticide. How could she build up a system of fraudulent fortune-telling, so intricate, so subtle, that it baffled the eye of the reporter, who confessed that he had not been able to detect the trickery. "It is only by induction, by inference, that one gets at the *modus operandi*," he admitted.

In his perturbation he walked away to the east and soon came out upon the lake-front. A bunch of men and boys of all types and sizes were playing ball on the barren ground, and with the athlete's undying love of the sport he rose and edged into the game. He could not resist showing his prowess by means of a few curves, and the crowd with instant perception began to take a vivid interest in him.

A half-hour of this restored his good-nature

and he returned to the cañons to the west, determined to find an opening somewhere. He was never dismissed rudely—he was too big and well-dressed for that—but the fact that he had no experience shut him out in most cases, and for the rest the departments were filled with salesmen. Twice when he seemed about to be taken on, his name and his mother's reputation shut the door of opportunity in his face.

At four o'clock he started slowly homeward, discouraged, not so much by his failure as by the fact that everybody seemed to have a knowledge of the article in the *Star*. It was evident that even when a manager did not at the moment make the connection between his name and Mrs. Ollnee's it would certainly come out later and he would be called upon to defend himself and his mother from the sneers and jeers of his fellow-salesmen. "I'm a marked man, that's sure," he said, in dismay.

All day his mind had dwelt in flashes on the glorious life at Winona, but now his memory of it was poisoned by the thought that he had been a pensioner on the bounty of Mrs. Joyce. "The easy thing would be to change my name and skip out for the plains," he said again, "but I won't. I'll stay and fight it out right here some way."

He was passing the public library at the moment and was moved to go in and look up the "want ads" in the papers. Ten minutes' reading

of these filled him with despair. There were so many wanting work! His feet were tired with walking and his brain weary with the movement of the street, therefore he moved on to the reference room where he found an atmosphere of study that was very grateful.

Accustomed to work of this kind, he asked the attendant to bring him catalogues, and was soon surrounded with books and magazines which dealt with the modern study of psychic phenomena. He fell upon one or two of these which gave exhaustive generalizations, and he was astounded to find that European men of science of the loftiest type were engaged in the study of precisely the same phenomena which his mother claimed to produce.

Careless of all else, he remained until six o'clock absorbed and confused by what he read. Words and phrases like "telekinesis," "teleplastic," "parasitic personalities," "externalized motricity," "bio-psychic energy" danced about in his brain like fantastic insects. He fairly staggered with the weight of the conceptions laid upon him, and when at last he went out into the streets he had forgotten his race for place behind the counter.

It was nearly sunset, and his afternoon—his day—had gone for naught! He was as far as ever from securing work—and wages—to keep his little mother and himself from the corrupting care of charity. He was a bit disgusted with

himself, too, for wasting valuable time, and yet he was enough of the scholar to feel a glow of delight in the company he had been keeping. There was something large and free in the attitude of those Italian men toward the universe, and before he had walked far he promised himself to go again and continue that line of investigation. As he walked up the avenue he came face to face with the dark, thin-faced girl who had knocked at his mother's door the day before. She seemed about to speak, but he passed her with blank look.

He found his mother at the window waiting for him, and upon seeing him she hurried to meet him at the head of the stairs.

"What luck?" she called, with a smile.

He shook his head. "Nothing doing," and received her caress rather coldly, for he perceived Mrs. Joyce in the room. "It isn't so easy to find a job. I'll be lucky if I dig one up in a week, I suppose."

Mrs. Joyce greeted him cordially. "I've just been making a proposition to your mother, Victor—I hope you'll let me call you Victor—which is, that we all go abroad for a few months till this storm blows over."

He looked at her with gravely interrogating glance. "How could we do that?"

She explained. "You both go as my guests, of course. We can motor through France in June and get up into Switzerland in July."

He sank into a chair and dazedly studied her. "Why should you offer to do all that for us?"

"Because I am very grateful to your mother for what she has done for me. She not only cured my mother of cancer—she has cured me of despair. She has taught me to believe again in the mystery of the world."

"You mean she has done this as—as a medium?"

"Yes—through her guides she has given me faith in the hereafter. Their advice on a hundred different things has made life easy for me. My wealth is largely due to the wisdom of Mr. Astor, who speaks through her. He advises, and so does your grandfather, that I take you all abroad this summer, and I think it a very nice suggestion."

"Oh, the suggestion came from The Voices, did it?" His voice was full of scornful suggestion.

"Yes; but I thought of it myself yesterday as I read that terrible article. You see, I'm told by Mr. Bartol, my lawyer, that the city officials are about to start another campaign against all forms of mediumship. I think it best, and so does your father, that we all leave the city for a time, and escape this persecution."

The beleaguered youth was not a polite deceiver at his best, and this proposal appeared to him not merely chimerical, but immoral, for the reason that his mother must have really proposed

it. Through her uncanny power of hypnosis, of suggestion, she had put the idea into her rich friend's head. "I won't consider any such proposition," he bluntly answered. "I don't recognize my mother's claim. You owe her nothing. I don't believe she can cure cancer, and she has no right to advise anybody in business matters."

"You say that because you know nothing of the facts," Mrs. Joyce briskly replied. "I understand your situation perfectly. Your mother has kept me informed of her worries—she has no secrets from me—and I must say I foresaw this antagonism on your part. I felt that you were growing away from her, and yet The Voices advised her to keep you at school and to say nothing. To show you how close they watch you I can tell you that we've been informed of your whereabouts several times to-day. You met a young man at noon, a pale, serious young man, whose name is Gilmer, who said he would help you. Isn't that true?"

He was properly surprised. "Yes, I did meet such a man."

"Then you went to the library and read for a long time?"

He sneered. "Did The Voices tell you that I was turned down everywhere on account of my mother's reputation as a medium?"

"No; but they said you would oppose the idea of our going abroad, and that you were under discipline."

"You're tired, Victor," interposed the mother. "Don't worry over me any more now. I'll get you some coffee."

While she was gone on this errand Mrs. Joyce leaned toward Victor and said: "I can understand a part of your feeling, because there was a time when I lived in the world of definite, commonplace things—but you must not oppose your mother's Voices. They are as real to her as anything in this universe. I've *proved* their reality again and again. As I say, they have advised me in my investments and always right. In a sense—in a very real sense—I owe a part of my wealth to your mother, and the little that she has permitted me to do in return for her aid is trifling. I want to do more. Please be just to your dear little mother, who is truly a marvelous creature and loves you beyond all other earthly things. She lives only for you. If it were not for you she would pass on to the spirit plane to-night."

Victor listened to her in a sullen meditation. The whole situation was becoming incredibly fantastic, vaporous as the texture of a dream.

Mrs. Joyce went on: "Come to my house to-night for dinner. Never mind the morrow till the morrow comes. Come and talk with some friends of mine—they may help you."

He spoke thickly: "I'm much obliged, Mrs. Joyce. I'm grateful for what you've done for us, but to take her money or yours now would be

—would be dishonest. I can't let you feed us any longer—we've got to fight this out alone."

"What will you do with her Voices?" she asked.

"Forget 'em," he answered, curtly.

"They'll force you to remember them," she warningly retorted. "I assure you they hold your fate in their hands."

Mrs. Ollnee, returning, cut short the discussion, which was growing heated.

As he drank his coffee Victor recovered a part of his native courtesy. "I'm going to win out," he said, with kindling eyes. "It would have been a wonder if I had found a job the first day. I'm going to keep going till I wear out my shoes."

A knock at the door made his mother start.

"Another reporter!" she whispered. "They're pestering me still."

Victor rose with a spring. "I'll attend to this reporter business," he said, hotly.

"No," interposed Mrs. Joyce; "let me go, please!"

He submitted, and she went to meet the intruder. Her quiet, authoritative voice could be heard saying: "Mrs. Ollnee is not able to see any one. That cruel and false article of yesterday has completely upset her.—No, I am only her friend and nurse. I have nothing to say except that the article in the *Star* was false and malignant."

Thereupon she closed and locked the door

and came back quite serious. "They've been coming almost every hour, determined to see your mother. I would have taken her away, only she persisted in saying she must remain here till you returned."

"Have you been here all day?" he asked, moved by the thought of her loyalty.

His mother answered. "Louise came about ten this morning—and except for an hour at lunch we've both been here waiting, listening."

This devotion on the part of a rich and busy woman was deeply revealing. The youth was being educated swiftly into new conceptions of human nature. His mother was neither beautiful nor wise nor witty. Why should she attract and hold a lady like Mrs. Joyce? He wondered if she had been quite honest with him. Would her interest be the same if The Voices had not enriched her?

She returned to her invitations. "Now put on your dinner-suit and come with us," she insisted. "My niece, Leo, will be there—surely you will respond to that lure?"

His mother laid her small hand upon his arm. "Let us go, Victor. I am in terror here."

"Why did you stay? Why didn't you go before?" he demanded.

"Because The Voices said '*Wait!*'—and besides, I wanted to be here when you came."

He rose. "You go. I will come after dinner and bring you home."

Mrs. Joyce was quick on the trail of his intent. "You refuse to eat my bread! You *are* rigorous. Very well. Let it be so. Come, Lucy, let us go."

Mrs. Ollnee seemed to listen a moment, then rose. "You'll surely come after dinner, Victor?"

"Yes, I'll come about nine," he replied, in a tone that was hard and cold. And she went away deeply hurt.

Left alone, he walked about the "ghost-room" with bitterness deeping into fury. What were these invisible, intangible barriers which confined him? He stood beside the old brown table which he had hated and feared in his boyhood. What silliness it represented. The pile of slates, some of them still bearing messages in pencil or colored crayon, offered themselves to his hand. He took up one of these and read its oracular statement: "*He will come to see the glory of the faith. His neck will bow. It is discipline. Do not worry. FATHER.*" Here was the source of his troubles!

He dashed the slate to the floor and ground it under his heel. Catching the table by the side and up-ending it, he wrenched its legs off as he would have wrung the neck of a vulture. He breathed upon it a blast of contempt and hate, and, gathering it up in fragments, was starting to throw it into the alley when the door burst open and his mother reappeared, white, breathless, appalled.

"*Victor;* what are you doing?" she called, with piercing intonation.

He was shaken by her tone, her manner, but he answered, "I'm going to throw this accursed thing into the alley."

She put herself before him with one hand pressed upon her bosom, her breath weak and fluttering.

"You—shall—not! You are killing me. Don't you see that is a part of me. Don't you know— Put it down instantly! *My very life and soul are in it.*"

He dropped the broken thing in a disordered pile at her feet. Her anguish, which seemed both physical and mental, stunned him. As they stood thus confronting each other Mrs. Joyce returned. She seemed to comprehend the situation instantly, and, putting her arm about the little psychic's waist, gently said, "You'd better lie down, Lucy, you are hurt."

Mrs. Ollnee permitted herself to be led to the little couch silently sobbing.

It was growing dusky in the room, and the youth, though still rebellious, was profoundly affected by this action. His hot anger died away and a swift repentance softened him. "Don't cry, mother," he said, clumsily kneeling beside her. "I didn't think you cared so much about the old thing."

Mrs. Joyce broke forth in scorn: "What a crude young barbarian you are! That table is

something more than a piece of wood to her. It is a sacred altar. It is the place where the quick and the dead meet. It is sentient with the touch of spirit hands—and you have desecrated it. You have laid violent hands upon your mother's innermost heart. You will destroy her if you keep on in this way."

At these words the youth for the first time caught a glimpse of the vital faith which lay behind and beneath these foolish and ridiculous practices. No matter what that worn table was to him, it stood for his mother's faith—that he now saw—and he was sorry.

"I can rebuild it again," he said. "It is not hopelessly smashed. I will repair it to-morrow."

The symbolism which could be read in his words seemed to comfort his mother and she grew quieter, but her face remained ghastly pale and her breathing troubled.

Mrs. Joyce turned to him again. "You can't deceive her. She knew the instant you laid your destroying hands on that slate."

He did not doubt this. In some hidden way his action had reached and acted upon his mother as she was speeding down the avenue. Her sudden return proved this—and his hair rose at the thought of her clairvoyancy, and in answer to Mrs. Joyce's question, "Why did you do it?" he replied, sullenly, but not bitterly:

"I did it because I detest the thing and all

that goes with it. I have hated that table all my life."

"What did you think your mother would do?"

"I didn't stop to think. I only wanted to get the brute out of sight. I wanted to end the whole trade at once."

"You've got to be careful or you'll end your mother's earth-life. Let me tell you, boy, if you want to keep her on this plane with you you must be gentle with her. Any shock, especially when she is in trance, is very dangerous to her."

Victor began to feel his helplessness in the midst of the intangible entangling threads of his mother's faith. He now saw the folly of his action, and took an unexpected way of showing his contrition.

"If you'll forgive me, mother, I'll go with you to Mrs. Joyce's dinner. Come, let's get away from here for a little while; I feel stifled."

This pleased and comforted her amazingly. She rose and placed one frail, cold hand about his neck. "Dear boy! I forgive you. You didn't realize what you were doing."

Releasing himself he gathered up the fragments of the table and tenderly examined them. "It can be mended," he reported. "I'll do it the first thing in the morning."

A faint smile came back to his mother's face. "I don't mind, Victor. I feel already that this has brought us closer together. Your father is

here—he is smiling—and I am happier than I've been for weeks."

Victor dressed for his party with trembling limbs. It seemed as if he had passed through a tremendous battle wherein he had been defeated —and yet his heart was strangely light.

V

VICTOR RECEIVES A WARNING

MRS. JOYCE'S house was a stone structure of rather characterless design which stood at the intersection of a wide boulevard and one of the narrower crosstown streets, but it seemed very palatial to Victor as he wonderingly entered its looming granite portal. His mother tripped up the stairs with the air of one who feels very much at home.

A man in snuff-colored livery took his hat and coat and ushered him into a large reception-room on the left, and there his hostess found him some ten minutes later. "Come and meet my brother from California," she said, and led the way across the hall into the library, where a tall man with gray hair and mustache was talking with a dark, alert and smoothly shaven man of middle age. The one Mrs. Joyce introduced as her brother, Mr. Wood, and the other as Mr. Carew.

Victor was relieved to have Miss Wood enter and greet him cordially, for the men did not seem to value him sufficiently to include him in their

conversation. Mr. Wood was reserved and the tone of Carew's voice was cynical.

Leonora Wood was of that severe type of beauty which requires stately gowns, and Victor confessed that she was quite the finest figure of a girl he had ever met, but when Mrs. Joyce said, "You are to take Leo out to dinner" he merely bowed, resenting her amused smile.

His seat at table brought him next a very old lady—Mrs. Wood, senior—who beamed upon him with cheerful interest. There were several other women of that vague middle age which does not interest youth.

Miss Wood talked extremely well, and he became interested in spite of himself.

"I wonder how much longer we're going to believe in 'luck' and 'coincidence,'" she said, after some remark of his. "Maybe it's all thought transference or telepathy or something."

"Don't tell me you really believe in such things. Professor Boyden says they are all a part of the spineless mysticism which is sweeping over the country."

She assumed a patronizing air. "It's natural for undergraduates to quote their teachers. I wonder how long it will be before you will consider them all old fogies."

He rose to the defense of his hero. "Boyden will never be an old fogy. He's the most up-to-date man in America. He really is the only ex-

perimentalist along these lines. He's out for the facts."

"Your mother's Voices say he is as blind as the rest, wilfully blind."

"Do you really hold stock in my mother's Voices?"

She gazed upon him in large-eyed wonder. "Yes, don't you?"

"No. How can they be anything but a delusion?"

"I don't know. I only know they are profoundly mysterious and that they tell me things which convince me. They seem to know my most secret thought. I have been *forced* to believe in them. My aunt's fortune has been doubled and my own income greatly augmented by their advice."

He took this up. "Tell me more about that. What did they advise you to do?"

"They advised buying certain stocks in a machine for making paper boxes and recommended the Universal Traction Company."

At this moment Mrs. Wood, senior, plucked at his sleeve. "Louise tells me you're the son of our dear medium, Lucy Ollnee."

"I am, yes," he replied, rather ungraciously, for he was eager to revert to Leo.

"Perhaps you're a medium yourself," the old lady pursued.

"Thank the Lord, no! I haven't the ghost of a Voice about me."

She chuckled. "At your age one thinks only of love and dollars. When you are as old as I am the next world will interest you a great deal more than it does now. Besides, you must believe in spirits after they have made you rich. They've made Louise and Leo rich—I suppose you know that?"

He soon turned back to Leo. "I wish people would not talk my mother's Voices to me. I hear nothing else now."

"It's your mother's 'atmosphere.' No one thinks of anything else when in her presence."

"Don't you see how intolerable all that is going to be for me?" he asked, with bitter gravity. "I can see that she isn't exactly human even to you. She's just a sort of a freak. No one loves her or seeks her for herself alone, only for what she can do. That's another reason why I must insist on her getting away from this. I will not have her treated like a wireless telephone."

Her eyes expressed more sympathy than she put into her voice. "I see what you mean; but, believe me, I had not thought of her in just that light, and I think you're quite wrong about my aunt. She is really very fond of your mother."

He was eager to know more of what this clear-sighted girl had seen, but her neighbor, Mr. Carew, claimed her, and he was forced back upon Grandmother Wood, who talked of her new faith to him for nearly half an hour.

After dinner, while the ladies were in the draw-

ing-room and the men were smoking their cigars, the perturbed youth expected to be freed from any further inquisition, for Philo Wood was apparently of that type of man who has no interest in the things he cannot turn into hard cash. The merits of a new strawboard box-machine was engaging his attention at this time, but, after a few minutes of polite discussion of the weather and other general topics, Carew, the lawyer, turned to Victor and began an interrogation which made him wince. Carew was very nice about it, but he pursued such a well-defined line of inquiry that it amounted to a cross-examination. He soon possessed himself of the fact that Victor did not approve of his mother's way of life and that he was trying to secure employment in order to stop all further "fortune-telling" on his mother's part. "I don't believe in it," he reiterated.

"The amazing thing to me," interposed Wood, with quiet emphasis, "is that her predictions come true. I 'play the ponies' a bit"—he smiled—"and I have tried to draw Mrs. Ollnee into partnership with me. 'You have the spooks point out the winning horse to me,' said I to her, 'and I'll share the pot with you.'"

"And she wouldn't do it?" asked Carew.

Wood seemed to be highly amused. "No, she says her guides do not sanction gambling of any sort. And yet she advises Louise to buy into a new transportation scheme that looks to me

like the worst kind of a gamble. My advice counts for nothing against these Voices."

"That's true," admitted Carew. "You might as well be the west wind so far as influencing her goes. Since 'Mr. Astor' butted into the game my services are good only in so far as they drive tandem with his! Now you say you have no belief in the thing," he said, turning again to Victor. "How is that? How did that come about?"

"Well, in the first place, I've given some study to what Professor Boyden calls delusional hysteria," Victor responded.

Wood smiled cynically. "My sister won't mind what you call it so long as it enables your mother to designate the winning stocks."

The attitude of each of these men was that of watchful tolerance, and Victor chafed under their assumption of superior wisdom. He plainly perceived that Wood was using the psychic for his own ends, and this angered him. He shut up like a clam and left the room as soon as he could decently do so.

He made his way to where Leonora was sitting on a sofa in the library and took his seat beside her, with intent to continue the conversation which they had begun at the dinner, but he forgot his problems as he looked into her merry, candid eyes.

Her first word was a compliment to his mother. "How pretty she looks to-night! No one would

suspect her of being 'the dark and subtle siren' of yesterday's *Star*. Her face is positively angelic at this moment. How beautiful she must have been as a girl! I must say you do not resemble her."

"Thank you," he said.

She laughingly explained. "I mean you are so tall and dark. You must resemble your father."

"I believe I do, although I cannot remember him."

"I wonder if he had your absurd pride. Aunt Louise tells me you absolutely refuse to accept any favor from her, and that you were practically forced into coming to dinner to-night. Is that true?"

He leaned toward her with intense seriousness. "How would you feel if you had suddenly learned that all your clothing, your food, your theater tickets—everything had been paid for in money drawn from strangers by means of—well—hypnotism."

"If I believed that I should feel as you do, but I don't. It is not so simple as all that. Your mother's power seems very real to me, and so far as I can now see she has given us all value received for every dollar. By rights one-half of all our profits belongs to her, or, if you prefer, to her Voices. Do you know that these Voices will not permit her to retain more than a scanty living out of all the wealth she makes for others? Did you know that?"

"I know she lives in a shabby apartment, and she tells me that she is entirely under the control of these 'guides.'"

"Yes, they refuse to let her keep anything beyond what she actually needs for herself and your education. I think all that should be counted in on her side, don't you? The fact that she is not enriching herself surely makes her part in the transaction a clean one."

He sank away from her and brooded over this thought for a minute or two before he replied. "But the whole thing is so preposterous. Have you seen her slate-writing 'stunt'?"

"Many times; but I don't think you should call it a 'stunt.'"

"Come, now, give me your honest opinion. Do you think my mother unconsciously cheats?"

She faced him with convincing candor. "No, I don't. I think she is perfectly simple and straightforward, and I believe the writing is supernormal."

"How can you believe that? You're a college girl, mother tells me. Don't the belief in these things wipe out everything you have been taught at school? It certainly rips science into strips for me, or would—if I believed it. It makes a fool of a man like Boyden, that's a sure thing."

Mrs. Joyce, looking across the room, smiled in delight at the charming picture these young people made in their animated conversation.

Doubtless they were glowing over Tennyson's position in modern poetry or the question of Meredith's ultimate standing in fiction.

What the youth was really saying to the maid was this: "What did you get out of it all? What did The Voices give you?"

"They told me to study composition, for one thing. They told me I would compose successful songs, with the aid of—of Schubert." She was a little embarrassed at the end.

"And you took all that in?"

She colored. "I'm afraid I didn't really believe the Schubert part. However, I'm studying composition on the *chance* of their being right."

"You say they advise you on money matters. How do they do that?"

"They advise my uncle through me to sell stock in a certain company and buy in another. They told me to withdraw my money from my California bank and put it into this Universal Traction Company."

"Did you do that?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I wish you wouldn't take their advice. I wish you would put your money back where it came from at once."

"Why?"

"Because it scares me to think of your going into anything on my mother's advice."

"But it wasn't your mother's advice. It was the advice of a great financier."

"You mean a dead financier?"

"Yes."

He did not laugh at this; on the contrary, his face darkened. "I've heard about that. Did he advise your uncle to go into this same transportation company?"

"Yes; all our friends are in it."

"You mean everybody that went to my mother for advice?"

"Yes."

"Do many go to her for help of this kind?"

"No, not many; she gives sittings only to my aunt and her friends now. There were several big business men of the city who went regularly. Why, Mr. Pettus, the president of the Traction Company, relies upon her."

The absurdity of these great capitalists going to his mother's threadbare little apartment for counsel in ways to win millions made Victor smile. He said, with a mock sigh, "I wish these Voices would tell me where to find a job that would pay fifteen dollars a week."

"They will—if you give yourself up to them. You must have faith."

"Oh, but the whole thing is dotty. Why should a poor farmer like my grandfather by just merely dying become a great financier?" Again his brow darkened and his voice deepened with contempt. "It's all poppycock! If he knows so much about the future why didn't he warn my mother against that reporter that came

in the other day to do her up? Why didn't he permit me to stay on at Winona and get my degree?"

The girl was troubled by his questions and evaded them. "It must have been hard to leave in the midst of your final term."

"It was punishing. It was like being yanked out of the box in the middle of an inning, with the game all coming your way."

She knew enough of baseball slang to catch his meaning and she smiled as she asked, "Why don't you go back?"

"Simply because I couldn't stand the chinning I'd get from my classmates."

"Can't you go on with your studies here and pass your examination?"

"I might do that if I could get a job that would pay me my board and leave me a little time to study."

She looked up at him with smiling archness. "Why not drive an automobile? You could carry your books around under the seat and study while waiting outside the shops or the theaters."

"Good idea!" he exclaimed, responding to her humor. "I'm pretty handy with the machine. One of my friends up at Winona had one. I hope you own a car." He said this with intent to indicate his growing desire to be near her.

Mrs. Joyce came over at this moment to inquire what they were so jolly about.

Leo answered: "I was just suggesting that Mr. Ollnee become a chauffeur. He could go on with his studies—"

"Capital!" exclaimed Mr. Joyce. "The man I have is liable to drink and very crusty in the bargain. You may have his place."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't do," he responded. "I might get crusty, too."

"I hope you are not liable to drink," said Leo.

"No, sarsaparilla is my only tipple. But this is all Miss Wood's joke," he explained.

"I'm not joking, indeed I'm not," the girl retorted. "I don't know of any skill that is more in demand just now than that of a chauffeur. I know of one who is studying the piano. I don't see any reason why Mr. Ollnee should not take it up temporarily. It's perfectly honorable. Witness Bernard Shaw's play."

"Oh, I'm not looking down on any job just now," he disclaimed. "All I ask is a chance to earn a living while I'm finding out what my best points are."

Mr. Wood beckoned and Leo rose to meet him. "We must be off," he said.

Victor bade Leo good-night with such feeling of intimacy and friendliness as he had not hoped to attain for any one connected with Mrs. Joyce. There was something in the pressure of her hand and in the sympathetic tone of her voice at the last that he remembered with keen pleasure.

Mr. Carew was deep in conversation with Mrs.

Ollnee, and Victor drew near with intent to know what was being said. The lawyer was very gentle, very respectful, but Mrs. Ollnee was undergoing a thorough investigation at his hands. He represented the calm, slow-spoken, but very keen inquisitor, and the psychic was already feeling the force of his delicate, yet penetrating sarcasm.

"I would advise you not to trust your Voices in matters that relate to life, limb, or fortune," he said, suavely, and a veiled threat ran beneath his words. "These Voices may de deceiving you."

Mrs. Ollnee protested with vehemence. "Mr. Carew, I am content to put my *soul* into their keeping."

He bowed and smiled. "Your faith is very wonderful." Then he added, with a glance at Mrs. Joyce, who was listening, "For myself, I would not put my second-best coat in their keeping."

Mrs. Joyce intervened at this point, and, after some little discussion of a conventional topic, offered to send Victor and his mother home in her car. Victor was not pleased by her offer. It was only putting him just that much deeper into her debt, but he could not well refuse, especially as his mother accepted it as a matter of course.

On the way he took up the question of Carew's warning. "He's right, mother. You must stop advising people to buy or sell."

"Why so, Victor?"

"Suppose you should advise buying the wrong thing?"

"But they don't advise the wrong thing, Victor. They are always right."

"Always?"

"Nobody has ever reported a failure," she declared.

"Well, it's sure to come. Why should father or grandfather know any more about stocks now than he did before he died?"

She was a little nettled by his tone. "They have the constant advice of a great financier on that side."

"So Miss Wood told me. Who is this great financier who is so willing to help you decide what to do with other people's money?" he asked, cuttingly.

She hesitated a little before saying "Commodore Vanderbilt."

He could not keep back a derisive shout. "Vanderbilt! Well, and you believe 'the great commodore' comes to our little hole of a home to advise us? Oh, mother, that's too ridiculous."

"My son," she began with some asperity, "we've been all over that ground before. You don't realize how you hurt, how you dishonor me when you doubt me and laugh at me."

He felt the pain in her voice and began an apology. "I don't mean to laugh at you, mother. But you must remember that I have

been a student for four years in the atmosphere of a great university, and all this business—I've got to be honest with you—it's all raving madness to me. You certainly must stop advising in business matters. Mr. Carew to-night intended to give you warning."

"I know he did," she quietly responded.

"He meant to be kind. He meant to say that you were liable at any moment to be held accountable for advice that went wrong. He told me that the courts were full of cases where mediums had led people into willing their property away, or where they had juggled with somebody else's fortunes. He told me of having convicted one woman of this and of having sent her to jail."

"But have I prospered from these advices?" she asked, indignantly. "Can any one accuse me of getting rich out of my 'work'? Please consider that."

"That does puzzle me. I can't see why 'they' help others and leave us with a bare living. And, most important of all, why do 'they' permit you to be hounded this way? Why didn't 'they' warn you? Why don't 'they' help me?"

She sighed submissively. "Of course they have their own reasons. In good time all will be revealed to us. They are wiser than we, for all the past and all the future are unrolled before their eyes."

This reply silenced him. Small and gentle as she was, Victor realized that she could resist

with the strength of iron when it came to an assault upon her faith.

Above the knob of their own door they found a folded newspaper, and this Victor seized with misgiving. "I wonder what is coming next?" he said.

She paled with a definite premonition of trouble. "Open it at once," she commanded.

He was as eager as she, for he, too, foresaw some new attack upon their peace. Lighting the gas, he opened the paper with trembling hands. On the first page was his own photograph and the story of his leaving college to defend his mother. Everything, even to the parting with Frenson, was set down, luridly, side by side with the report of a celebrated murder trial.

At sight of this new indignity his sense of youth and weakness came back upon him and, crumpling up the paper, he flung it upon the floor in impotent rage.

"That ends the fight here," he said. "How can I go about this town seeking work to-morrow? Everybody will know my story, and, what's more, here is your address given in full. Don't you see that makes it impossible for either of us to remain here another day?"

For the first time in her life the indomitable little psychic quailed before the persistent malice of her foes. The splintered altar of her faith lying in a disordered heap upon the floor symbolized the estrangement which she felt between her

invisible guides, her son, and herself. Her maternal anxiety had developed swiftly in these few hours of blissful companionship, and the world of wealth and comfort—for her boy's sake—had become suddenly of enormous importance to her. She wished him to be a happy man, and this desire weakened her abstract sense of duty to the race. She spoke aloud in a tone of entreaty, addressing herself to the intangible essences about her. "Father, are you here? Speak to me, help me, I need you."

Victor turned upon her with darkened brow. "Oh, for God's sake, stop that! I don't want any advice from the air."

She persisted. "Paul, come to me! Tell me what to do. Please come!"

Her voice was thrilling with its weakness and appeal, but Victor was furious. He refused to listen. His brow was set and stern.

At last she cried out, poignantly, "They are not here. They have deserted us. What shall I do?" She turned toward the table. "Rebuild my altar. You said you would. Restore that and perhaps they will come to us again. They are angry with me now. They have left me, perhaps forever."

"If 'they' have I shall be glad of it," he returned, brutally. "'They' have been a curse to you and to me, also. We are better off without them. Come, let us pack up the few things we have and go away into the West, where no one

will know even so much as our name. That is the only way left open for us."

"No, no," she cried out, "that is impossible. I must remain here. I must wait until they come back to me. I can't go now, and you must not desert me," she ended, and in her voice was something very pitiful.

He moved away from her and took his seat in sullen rage. For a long time he did not even look at her, though he knew she was waiting and listening.

At last he rose, and his voice was harsh and hoarse. "Mother, my mind is made up. There's no use talking against it. I leave this city to-morrow morning. I shall go as far as my money will carry me. I shall change my name and get rid of this whole accursed business. I've hated it, I've hated your 'ghost-room' and your Voices all my life, and this is the end of it for me. If you will not go with me then I must leave you behind."

She uttered a moaning cry of grief and ran like one stricken into her room, flinging herself face downward upon her bed. He listened for a few moments with something tugging at his heart-strings, but his face was set in unrelenting lines. Then he rose and set to work repacking his trunk.

VI

VICTOR IS CHECKED IN HIS FLIGHT

WHEN Victor woke from his uneasy sleep next morning his first glance was toward his mother's room wherein he had seen her vanish in an agony of grief and despair. All was quiet, and after dressing himself—still firmly resolved upon flight—he went to the door and silently peered in.

She was sleeping peacefully, her thin hands folded on her breast, and he drew a sigh of relief.

"I am glad she's able to sleep," he said, and stole back to the pantry.

He studied its sparse supplies with care. There was not much to do with, but he boiled some eggs and made coffee very quietly, with intent to let his mother sleep as long as she could. He found himself less savage than the night before.

"I can't leave till she wakes," he said to himself, "but I'm going, all the same."

In order to pass the time of waiting he went down to the foot of the stairs to find the morning

paper. He opened it with apprehension, but breathed a sigh of relief upon finding no further "scare heads" of himself. The only reference to his mother came in the midst of an editorial advocating the cleaning out of all the healers, palmists, fortune-tellers, and mediums in the city. With lofty virtue the writer went on to say that the *Star* had refused to advertise the business of these people, no matter what the pecuniary reward, and that it purposed a continuous campaign. "We intend to pursue all such women as Mrs. Ollnee, who fasten upon their credulous dupes like leeches," he declared.

As Victor read this paragraph he caught again the violence of contrast between the woman pictured by the pen of the editor and the pale, sweet, mild-voiced little woman who was his mother. It would have been funny had it not been so serious and so personal. Furthermore, the paragraph strengthened him in his determination to leave the city, and he still hoped to be able to persuade his mother to go with him.

At eight o'clock he once more tiptoed in to see if she still slept, and finding her in the same position his heart softened with pity. "She must have been completely tired out, poor little mother! I'm afraid what I said to her worried her."

After another hour of impatient waiting he again entered her room and studied her more intently. There was something suggestive of

death in the folded hands and he could detect no breathing. Her face was as pale as that of a corpse, and his blood chilled a little as he approached her. He called to her at last, but she did not stir.

Stepping to her bedside, he laid his palm upon her wrist. It was cold as ice, and he started back filled with fear. "Mother! *mother!* Are you ill?" he called. She gave no sign of life.

For a long time he stood there, rigid with fear, not knowing what to do. He knew no one in all the city upon whom he could call save Mrs. Joyce and Leo, and he did not know their street or number. He felt himself utterly alone, helpless, ignorant as a babe, and in the presence of death.

Gradually his brain cleared. Sorrow overcame his instinctive awe of a dead body. He felt once more the pulseless arm and studied closely the rigid face. "She is gone!" he sobbingly cried, "and I was so cruel to her last night!"

The memory of his harsh voice, his brutal words, came back to plague him, now that she was deaf to his remorse. How little, how gentle she was, and how self-sacrificing she had been for him! "She burned out her very soul for me," he acknowledged.

He remained beside her thus till the sound of a crying babe on the floor below suggested to him the presence of neighbors. Hastening down-

stairs, he knocked upon the first door he came to with frantic insistence.

A slatternly young woman with a crown of flaming red-gold hair came to the door. She smiled in greeting, but his first words startled her.

"My mother is dead. Come up and help me. I don't know what to do."

His tone carried conviction, and the girl did not hesitate a moment. She turned and called: "Father, come here quick. Mrs. Ollnee is dead."

An old man with weak eyes and a loose-hung mouth shuffled forward. To him the girl explained: "This is Mrs. Ollnee's son. He says his mother is dead. I'm going up there. You look out for the baby." She turned back to Victor. "When did she die?"

"I found her cold and still this morning."

"Have you called a doctor?"

"No, I don't know of any to call."

"Jimmie!" she shrieked.

A boy's voice answered, "What ye want, maw?"

"Jimmie, you hustle into your clothes and run down the street to Doctor Sill's office and tell him to come up here right away. Hurry now!"

Closing the door behind her, she started resolutely up the stairway, and her action gave Victor a grateful sense of relief.

"What do you think ailed her?" she asked.

"I don't know. She seemed all right last night when I went to bed."

This woman, young in years, was old in experience, that was evident, for she proceeded unhesitatingly to the silent bedside with that courage to meet death which seems native to all women. She, too, listened and felt for signs of life and found none. "I reckon you're right," she said, quietly. "She's cold as a stone."

At her words the strong young fellow gave way. He turned his face to the wall, sobbing, tortured by the thought that his bitter and savage assault and expressed resolve to leave her had been the cause of his mother's death. "What can I do?" he asked, when he was able to speak. "I must do something—she was so good to me."

The young woman, looking upon him with large tolerance and a certain measure of admiration, replied: "There's nothing to do now but wait for the doctor. You'd better come down with me and have some coffee."

He did not feel in the least like eating or drinking, but he needed human companionship. Therefore he followed his neighbor down the stairs and into her cluttered little living-room with submissive gratitude. The home was slovenly, but it was glorified by kindliness. A tousled baby of eighteen months was keeping the old man busy and a small boy of eight or nine was struggling into his knickerbockers, and Victor, thrust into the midst of this hearty, dirty, noisy household, remembered with increasing respect his mother's dainty housekeeping. "She

was a lady," he said to himself, in definition of the difference between her apartment and this. "Her home was poor, but it was never ratty."

Mrs. Bowers was kindness and consideration itself. Her father, deaf and partly paralytic, was treated gently, although he was irritatingly slow of comprehension and insisted on knowing all about what had taken place up-stairs. It pained and disgusted Victor inexpressibly to have his mother's condition bawled into the old man's ears, but he could not reasonably interfere.

He thought of Mrs. Joyce, knowing that his mother would want to have her instantly informed. "I ought to telephone some friends," he said to Mrs. Bowers. "Where is the nearest 'phone?"

She told him, and he went out and down the steps in haste to let Mrs. Joyce know of his tragic bereavement, and when at the drug-store near by he finally succeeded in getting communication with the house he was deeply disappointed to be told by the butler that Mrs. Joyce was not down and could not be disturbed so early in the morning.

"But I *must* see her," he insisted. "My mother, Mrs. Ollnee, her friend, is—is—very sick. I am Victor, her son, and I'm sure Mrs. Joyce would want to speak to me."

The butler's voice changed. "Oh, very well, Mr. Ollnee," he replied, knowing the intimacy

which existed between his mistress and the psychic. "Just hold the line; I'll call her."

It was a long time before the calm, cultivated voice of Mrs. Joyce came over the 'phone, but it was worth the waiting for. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Mrs. Joyce, this is Victor Ollnee. My mother is very, very ill. I'm afraid she's dead."

He heard her gasp of pain and surprise as she called: "Your mother! Why she seemed perfectly well last night."

"I found her lying cold and still this morning. I can't detect any pulse or any breathing. Can't you come over at once? Please do. I don't know a soul in the city but you, and I'm in great trouble."

"You poor boy! Of course I'll come. I'll be over instantly. Have you called a doctor?"

"No, I don't know of any."

"Where are you now?"

"At the corner drug-store."

"Is any one with your mother?"

"No, but the woman below has been up. She is quite sure my mother is dead."

"Gracious heavens! I can't realize it. Good-by for a few minutes. I'll come at once."

Victor returned to Mrs. Bowers's apartment with a glow of grateful affection for Mrs. Joyce. It was wonderful what comfort and security came to him with her voice so sincerely filled with compassion and desire to help. He wondered if

Leo would come with her, and asked himself how the news of his bereavement would affect her. Her attitude toward him had been that of the elder sister who felt herself also to be the wiser, but he did not resent that now.

He thought of the effect of his mother's death upon the press. Would the *Star* forego its malignant assault upon her character now that she was gone beyond its reach? Would those who threatened her with arrest be remorseful?

Mrs. Bowers persuaded him to take another cup of hot coffee, and then together they returned to the little apartment above to wait for the coming of the doctor and Mrs. Joyce. The young mother became philosophical at once. "After a body gets to be forty I tell you he don't know what's going to happen next. I reckon you better set here where you can't see the bed," she added, kindly. "It don't do any good, and it only makes you grieve the harder."

He obeyed her like a child and listened through his mist of tears as she rambled on. "I've had my share of trouble," she explained. "First my mother went, then my oldest boy, then my husband took sick. Yes, a body has to face trouble about so often, anyway, and, besides, I don't suppose your mother was afraid of death, anyhow. I've known all along what her business was, ever since I came into the house, and I've been up to see her a few times. Still I'm not much of a believer. Dad is, though. It's

his greatest affliction that he can't hear The Voices any more. I want to say I believe in your mother. She was a mighty fine woman; but the docterin of spiritualism I never could swaller, notwithstanding I grew up 'longside of it."

The sound of a decisive step on the stairs cut her short. "I bet a cookie that's the doctor!"

A clear, crisp, incisive voice responded to her greeting at the door, and a moment later a beardless, rather fat young fellow was confronting Victor with professional, smiling eyes. "You're not the patient," he stated, rather than asked. Victor shook his head and pointed to the bed.

With quick step the physician entered the bedroom and set to work upon the motionless form with methodical haste. He was still busy in this way when the whir of a motor car announced Mrs. Joyce.

Victor was at the door to meet her, and when she saw him she opened her arms and took him to her broad, maternal bosom. "You poor boy!" she said, patting his shoulder. "You're having more than your share of trouble."

He frankly sobbed out his penitence and grief. "Oh, Mrs. Joyce! She's gone, and I was so hard last night. I'll never forgive myself for what I said to her."

She again patted him on the shoulder with intent to comfort him. "There, there! I don't believe you have anything to reproach yourself

for, and, then, remember your mother's beautiful faith. She has not gone far away. Her heaven is not distant. She is very near. She has merely cast off the garment we call flesh. She is here, close beside you, closer than ever before, touching you, knowing what you think and feel."

In this way she comforted him, and in a measure drew his mind away from the memory of his cruel and unfilial words.

Sill approached her with thoughtful glance. "Are you related to this woman?"

"No, I am only a friend," replied Mrs. Joyce; "but this is her son."

"When did you discover your mother's present condition?"

"This morning."

"Did you fold her hands and put her in the position she occupies?"

"No, that is the strange thing. When I left her last night she was—she was lying across the bed, face downward. I had just told her that I was going away and that I wanted her to go with me. She refused to do this and tried to get The Voices to speak to her. They would not come, and so she, being hurt, I suppose, by what I said, ran into the room and flung herself down on the bed, weeping. I was angry at her and did not speak to her again. I went to sleep out here on the couch, and did not see her again till morning. When I looked in at eight o'clock she was lying just as she is now."

Sill eyed him keenly. "Do you mean that you quarreled?"

Mrs. Joyce interposed. "I can explain that," she said. "Mrs. Ollnee was my friend. She was what is called a medium. She is the Mrs. Ollnee you may have read about in the papers."

"Ah!" Sill's tone conveyed a mingling of surprise and increased interest. "So you are the son of Mrs. Ollnee?" he said, turning to Victor.

Mrs. Joyce again answered for him. "Yes; he has been away at school; he came home Sunday to comfort and protect his mother; but, unfortunately, he does not accept her faith. He rebelled against her work, and demanded that she give up her Voices. I can understand his wanting her to go away with him, and I can understand also how painful it was to her; but I don't believe that what he said had anything to do with her passing out. She was very frail at best, and has many times said that she expected to leave the body in one of her trances and never again resume her worn-out garment."

"She was subject to trances, then?"

"Yes, though not strictly a trance-medium, she did occasionally pass out of the body."

"May I take your name?"

"Certainly; I am Mrs. John H. Joyce, of Prairie Avenue."

His manner changed. "Oh yes. I should have known you, Mrs. Joyce, I have seen you before. What you tell me does not explain the

disposal of Mrs. Ollnee's body. She must have gone to her death consciously, as if preparing to sleep. Perhaps she intended only to enter a trance."

Mrs. Joyce started. "She may be in trance now! Have you thought of that, Doctor?"

Victor's heart bounded at the suggestion. "Do you think it possible?" he asked, excitedly.

Sill remained unmoved. "She does not respond to any test, I'm sorry to say. Life is extinct."

The entrance of Doctor Eberly, a tall, stooping man with deep-set eyes and a sad, worn face, cut short this explanation. Eberly was Mrs. Joyce's family physician, and taking him aside she presented the case.

Eberly knew Doctor Sill, and together they returned to Mrs. Ollnee's bedside while Mrs. Joyce kept Victor as far away from their examination as possible.

"There have been many cases of this deep trance, Victor, and we must not permit the coroner to come till we are absolutely convinced that your mother has gone out never to return."

"She must come back," he cried, huskily. "She did so much for me. I want to do something for her."

"You did a great deal for her, my dear boy. It was a great joy and comfort to her to see you growing into manhood. She was a little afraid of you, but she worshiped you all the same. Your letters were an ecstasy to her."

"And I wrote so seldom," he groaned. "I was so busy with my games, my studies, I hardly thought of her. If she will only come back to me I will give up everything for her."

"She understood you, Victor. She was a wonderful little woman, lovely in her serene, high thought. She lived on a lofty plane."

"I begin to see that," he answered, contritely. "I understand her better now."

The kindly Mrs. Bowers had slipped away back to her household below, and the men of science were still deep in a low-toned, deliberate discussion, so that Victor and the woman he now knew to be his best friend were left to confront each other in mutual study. He was wondering at her interest in him, and she was weighing his grief and remorse, thinking enviously of his youth and bodily perfection. "I wish you were my son," she uttered, wistfully.

Doctor Eberly again approached, walking in that quaint, sidewise fashion which had made him the subject of jocose remark among his pupils at the medical school.

Mrs. Joyce was instant in inquiry. "How is she, Doctor?"

"Life is extinct," he replied, with fateful precision.

"Are you sure?" she demanded.

"Reasonably so. One is never sure of anything that concerns the human organism," he replied, wearily.

She warned him: "You must remember she was accustomed to these trances."

"So I understand. Nevertheless, this is something more than trance. So far as I can determine, this body is without a tenant."

"The tenant may come back," she insisted.

He looked away. "I know your faith, but I am quite sure all is over. *Rigor mortis* has set in."

She rose emphatically. "I have a feeling that you are both mistaken. Let me see her. Come, Victor, why do you shrink? It is but her garment lying there."

She led the way to the bedside and laid her warm, plump hands on the pale, thin cold, and rigid fingers of her friend. She stooped and peered into the sightless visage. "Lucy, are you present? Can you see me?"

Doctor Sill then said: "The eyes alone puzzle me. The pupils are not precisely—"

"If there is the slightest doubt—" Mrs. Joyce began.

"Oh, I didn't mean to convey that, Mrs. Joyce. I was merely giving you the exact point—"

"She shall lie precisely as she is till to-morrow," announced Mrs. Joyce, firmly. "I have an 'impression' that she wishes to have it so. Will you permit this?" She confronted the two physicians. "Will you wait till to-morrow before reporting?"

Doctor Eberly considered a moment. "If you insist, Mrs. Joyce, and if it is Mr. Ollnee's wish—"

"Yes, yes," Victor cried, "I've heard of people being buried alive. It is too horrible to think about! Leave us alone till to-morrow."

The physicians conferred apart, and at last Eberly turned to say: "It seems to us a perfectly harmless concession. We will not report the case till to-morrow. Doctor Sill will call in the morning and decide what further course to take."

"Thank you," repeated Mrs. Joyce.

After the doctors had gone she turned to Victor, saying: "There is nothing for us to do now but to wait. If Lucy has gone out of her body forever she will manifest to us here in some familiar way. If she intends to return she will revive the body and speak from it sometime between now and dawn."

"She seems to sleep," he said; and now that his awe and terror were lessened by his hope, he was able to study her face more exactly. "How peaceful she seems—and how little she is!"

"A great soul in a dainty envelope," Mrs. Joyce replied. "Would you mind taking my car and going to my home to tell Leonora where I am? I wish also you would bring Mrs. Post, my seamstress, back with you. She's a good, strong, kindly soul and will be most helpful to-day."

He consented readily and went away in the car, with the bright spring sunlight flooding the

world, feeling himself snared in an invisible net. All thought of leaving the city passed out of his mind. He thought only of his mother and of her possible revivification. "I will fight the world here if only she will return," he said.

It seemed years since the ball game of Saturday wherein he had taken such joyous and honorable part. At that time his universe held no sorrow, no care, no uncertainty. Now here he sat, plunged deep in mystery and confusion, face to face with death, penniless, beleaguered, and alone.

"What would I do without Mrs. Joyce?" he asked himself. "She is a wonderful woman." Strange that in a single hour he should come to lean upon her as upon an elder sister.

He suddenly remembered that she had probably come away from home without her breakfast, and that she would find not so much as a crust of bread in his mother's kitchen, and the thought made him flush with shame. "What a selfish fool I am," he said, and seized the speaking-tube with intent to order the chauffeur to turn, but, reflecting that it would take only a few minutes longer to go on, he dropped the mouth-piece and the machine whirled steadily forward.

As he ran up the wide steps Leonora opened the door for him, looking very alert and capable, her face full of wonder and question. "How is your mother?" she quickly, tenderly, asked.

He choked in his reply. "The doctors say she is—dead, but your aunt insists that it is only a trance." He turned away to hide his tears. "I am hoping she's right, but I'm afraid that the doctors—"

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked, her voice tremulous with sympathy.

"Yes, if you will please send Mrs. Post, the seamstress, over with me. We have no one in the house, and Mrs. Joyce needs help."

"I will go, too," she responded, quickly. "Please be seated while I call Mrs. Post. Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes; but Mrs. Joyce has not, and I'm afraid there isn't a thing in our house to eat."

"I'll take something over," she replied, and hastened away.

He did not sit, he could not even compose himself to stand, but walked up and down the hall like a leopard in its cage. Now and again a liveried servant passed, glancing at him curiously, but he did not mind. Mingled with other whirling emotions was a feeling of gratitude toward Leonora, whose air of conscious superiority had given place, for the moment, to exquisite gentleness and pity. She soon had the seamstress and some lunch bestowed in the car. "We are ready, Mr. Ollnee," she called.

She said very little during their ride. Occasionally she made some remark of general sig-

nificance, or spoke to Mrs. Post upon the duties which she might expect to meet, and for this reserve Victor was grateful. She understood him through all his worry. Though he did not directly study her, he was acutely conscious of her every movement. Her unruffled precision of action, her calmness, her consideration for his grief appealed to him as something very womanly and sweet.

His mother's neighbors had been aroused to a staring heat of interest, and from almost every window curious faces peered. Victor perceived and resented their scrutiny, but Leonora seemed not to mind. She alighted calmly and carried the basket of lunch in her own hands to the stairway, though she permitted Victor to lead the way.

Mrs. Joyce met them with a grave smile. "You are prompt. I am glad to see you, Leo, and you, too, Mrs. Post. We have a long watch before us."

It was a singular and absorbing vigil to which Victor and the three women now set themselves. While Greek and Italian hucksters lamentably howled through the alleys and the milk-wagons and grocers' carts clattered up the streets, they waited upon the invisible and listened for the inaudible—so thin is the line between the prosaic and the mystic!

Each minute snap or crackle in the woodwork was to Mrs. Joyce a sign that the translated

spirit was struggling to manifest itself; but the seamstress, stolid with years of toil and trouble, sat beside the bed with calm gaze fixed upon the small, clear-cut face half hid in the pillows, as if it mattered very little to her whether she watched with the dead or sewed robes of velvet for the living. "It's all in the day's work," she was accustomed to say.

Leo, with intent to comfort Victor, told of several notable cases of "suspension of animation" with which the literature of the Orient is filled, and Victor took this to be, as she intended it to be, an attempt to comfort and sustain.

At times it seemed that he must be dreaming, so unreal was the scene and so extraordinary was the composure of these women. They had the air of those who await in infinite calm leisure the certain return of a friend. Now and again Mrs. Joyce rose and looked down upon the motionless form, and then perceiving no change resumed her seat. From time to time intruders mounted the stairs, knocked, and, getting no reply, tramped noisily down again.

Victor was all for throwing things in their faces, but Mrs. Joyce interposed. When he looked from the windows he saw grinning faces turned upward, and waiting cameras could be seen on the walk opposite, ready to snap every living thing that entered—or came from—the house. In truth, Victor and his friends were enduring a state of siege.

At last Mrs. Joyce said: "Nothing is gained by your staying here, Victor. Why don't you go for a ride in the park? Leo, take him down to the South Side Club."

Victor protested. "I cannot go for a pleasure trip at such a time as this. It is impossible!"

She met him squarely. "Victor, death to me is merely a passing from one plane to another. Besides, I don't think your mother has altogether left us. But if she has, you can do no good by remaining here. Mrs. Post and I are quite sufficient. It is a glorious spring day. I beg you to go out and take the air. It will do you infinite good."

"If there is nothing I can do here then I ought to resume my search for work," he replied, sturdily. "Now that I cannot take my mother away with me, there is nothing for me to do but to find employment here and face our enemies as best I can."

She opposed him there also. "Don't do that —not now. Wait. I have a plan. I'll not go into it now, but when you come back, if there is no change, we will all go home and I will explain."

The young people had risen and were starting toward the door when an imperative, long drawn-out rapping startled them.

"That's no reporter's rap. There is authority in that," remarked Mrs. Joyce, as she hurried to the door.

A very tall man with a long gray beard stood there. "Good-day, madam," he began, in a husky voice. "I hear that my friend, Mrs. Ollnee, is sick, and I've come to see about it. I'm her friend these many years and of her faith, and I think I can be of some assistance."

Mrs. Joyce dimly remembered having seen him in the house before, so she replied, very civilly, "Mrs. Ollnee lies in what seems to be deep trance, although the doctors say that life is extinct."

"Will you let me see her?" he inquired. "I know a great deal about these conditions. My daughter was subject to them."

"You may come in," she said, for his manner was gentle. "This is her son, Victor."

Victor was vexed by the stranger's intrusion, but could not gainsay Mrs. Joyce.

"My name is Beebe, Doctor Beebe," he explained. "Mrs. Ollnee has given me many a consoling message, and I believe I've been of help to her. You're her son, eh?"

"I am," replied Victor, shortly.

"You were the vein of her heart," the old man solemnly assured him. "Her guides were forever talking of you. And now may I see her?"

Mrs. Joyce, after a moment's hesitation, led him to the door of the room and stood aside for him to enter. After looking down into the silent face for a long time he asked, in stately fashion, "May I make momentary examination of the body?"

Mrs. Joyce glanced at Victor. "I see no objection to your feeling for her pulse or listening for her breath."

"I wish to lift her eyelids," he explained.

"You must not touch her!" Victor broke forth. "Two doctors have examined her already. Why should you?"

"Because I, too, am one of the mystic order. I am a healer. Life's mysteries are as an open book to me."

As he spoke a folded paper appeared to develop out of thin air above the bed, and fell gently upon the coverlet.

Mrs. Joyce started. "Where did that come from?"

The healer smiled. "From the fourth dimension." Calmly taking up the folded paper, he opened it. "This is a message to you, young man."

"To me?" Victor exclaimed. "From whom?"

"It is signed 'Nelson.'"

"Let me see it?" demanded Mrs. Joyce.

"What does it say?" asked Victor.

Mrs. Joyce handed it to him. "Read it for yourself. It is from your grandfather."

He read: "*Your mother is with us, but she will return to you for a little while. Her work is not yet ended. Your stubborn neck must bow. There is a great mission for you, but you must acquire wisdom. Learn that your plans are nothing, your strength puny, your pride pitiful. We*

love you, but we must chastise you. Do not attempt to leave the city. *NELSON."*

As he stood reading this letter it seemed to Victor that a cold wind blew upon him from the direction of his mother's body, and his blood chilled. "This is some of your jugglery," he said, turning angrily upon Beebe.

"I assure you, no," replied the healer, quietly. "It came from behind the veil. It is a veritable message from the shadow world. I may have had something to do with its precipitation, for I, too, am psychic, but not in any material way did I aid the guide."

The whole affair seemed to Victor a piece of chicanery on the part of this intruder, and he bluntly said: "I wish you'd go. You can do no good here. You have no business here."

Beebe seemed not to take offense. "It's natural in you young fellows to believe only in the world of business and pleasure, but you'll be taught the pettiness and uselessness of all that. Your guides have a work for you to do, and the sooner you surrender to their will the better. You are fighting an invisible but overwhelming power."

He addressed Mrs. Joyce. "This message is conclusive. Mrs. Ollnee, our divine instrument, has not abandoned the body. Her spirit will return to its envelope soon." He turned back to Victor. "As for you, young sir, there is warfare and much sorrow before you. Good-day."

And with lofty wafture of the hand he took himself from the room.

Not till he had passed entirely out of hearing did Victor speak, then he burst forth. "The old fraud! I wonder how many more such visitors we are to have? I wish we could take her away from this place."

"We might take her to my house," said Mrs. Joyce, "but I would not dare to do so without the consent of the doctors."

"Did you see how that man produced that message?"

Leo replied, "It developed right out of the air."

"It was a direct materialization," confessed Mrs. Joyce. "My own feeling is that your grandfather sent it to assure us of your mother's return."

Victor silently confronted them, his anxiety lost in wonder. He had been told spiritualists were an uneducated lot, and to have these cultured and intelligent women calmly express their acceptance of a fact so destructive of all the laws of matter as this folded note, blinded him. He shifted the conversation. "Isn't it horrible that I should be here without a dollar and without a single relative? I don't even know that I have a relation in the world. My mother told me that she had a brother somewhere in the West, but I don't think she ever gave me his address. There must be aunts or uncles some-

where in the East, but I have never heard from them. It seems as though she had kept me purposely ignorant of her family. You've been very good and kind to me, Mrs. Joyce, but I can't ask anything more of you. I can't ask you to stay here in this gloomy little hole. Please go home. I'll fight it out here some way alone."

"My dear boy," said Mrs. Joyce, "I insist on staying. I cannot leave Lucy in her present condition, and I refuse to leave you alone. She is coming back to you soon, and then we will plan for the future. As for the message, you will do well to take its word to heart. It is plainly a warning that you must not leave the city."

"But, Mrs. Joyce, think what it involves to believe that that letter dropped out of the air!"

"The world has grown very vast and very mysterious to me," she solemnly responded. "I've had even more wonderful things than that take place in my own home."

Mrs. Joyce saw that to go would be best, at least for the time, and together she and Leo went down the stairway and out into the street, leaving the stubborn youth to confront his problem alone with the phlegmatic Mrs. Post.

VII

THE RETURN OF THE SPIRIT

YOUTH is surrounded by mystery—nothing but magic touches him; but it is a beautiful, natural, hopeful magic. The mists of morning rise unaccountably, the rains of autumn fall without cause. The lightning, the snows, the grasses appear and vanish before the child's eyes like magical conjurations, until at last, for the most part, he accepts these miracles as commonplace because they happen regularly and often. In a world that is incomprehensible to the greatest philosopher, the lad of twenty comes and goes unmoved by the essential irresolvability of matter.

So it had been with Victor. Under instruction he had come to speak of electricity as a fluid, of steel as a metal, as though calling them by these names explained them. He discussed the ether, calmly considering it a sort of finely attenuated jelly, something which quivered to every blow and was capable of transmitting motion instantaneously. Sound, heat, and light were modes of motion, he had been told, and

these words satisfied him. Food taken into the body produced power, and this power was transmitted from the stomach to the brain, and from the brain to the muscles, and so the limbs were moved. But just how the meat and potatoes got finally from the brain to the nerves and so into the swing of a baseball bat did not trouble him. Why should it?

Life and age were mere words. Death he had heard described by clergymen as something to be prepared for, a dark and dismal event reserved for old people, but which did occasionally catch a man in his arrogant youth, generally in the midst of his sins. Life meant having a good time, a succeeding in sport, business, or love. Of course certain philosophic phrases like "continuous adjustment of the organism to the environment" and "the change of the organism from the simple to the complex" had stuck in his mind. But any real thought as to what these changes actually meant had been put aside quite properly, for the pastimes and ambitions of the student to whom study is an incidental price for a joyous hour at play.

But now, here in this room, beside the motionless body of his mother, he began to think. He had a good mind. His father had left him a rich legacy in his splendid body, but also something mental—latent to this hour—which produced an irritating impatience with the vague and the mysterious. He resented the intrusion

of an insoluble element into his thinking. He was repelled by the discovery that his mother was abnormal, and from the point of view of this "ghost-room" his life at the university was becoming sweeter, more precious, more normal every hour.

Then, too, his afternoon of reading at the library had put into his mind several new and all-powerful conceptions which had germinated there like the seeds which the Indian "adept" plants in pots of sand, rising, burgeoning, blossoming on the instant. He knew the names of some of those men whose words might be counted on the side of his mother's endowment, for they were famous in physical or moral science, but he had not known before that they admitted any real belief in the kind of things which his mother professed to perform.

The conception that the human soul was (as the ancients believed) a ponderable, potent entity capable of separating itself from the body, came to him with overwhelming significance. "If mother still lives," he said to the nurse, "where is she? What form has she taken?"

Mrs. Post, in her own way, was capable of expressing herself. "She is not there. So much we know. Her body is here. It is like a cloak which she has thrown down. She herself is invisible, but she will return and take up her body, and then you will see it grow warm again and

her eyes will light up like lamps, and she will rise and speak to you."

Of course he did not believe this. That her body was a cast-off garment was easy to comprehend, but that her spirit hovered near and would re-enter its former habitation was incredible.

All day he remained there, pacing to and fro, or sitting bent and somber over his problem. At noon he got a little lunch for himself and for the nurse. At two o'clock Mrs. Joyce returned to take him for a drive in her car. But this he again refused. Thereupon she went away, promising to look in again later in the evening.

At dusk he stole down into the street to mail a letter to Frensen, wherein he had written: "I am a good deal of a broken reed to-day, but I am going to fight. I wish you were here to talk things over with me. I'm surrounded by people who believe in the supernatural, and I need some one like yourself to brace me up."

This was true. He had been thrust into the midst of those who dwelt upon the amazing and the inexplicable in human life. The city, which had been to him so vast, so ugly, and so menacing in a material way, now became mysterious in an entirely different way. He had now a sense of its infinite drama, its network of purpose. There was some comfort, however, in the thought that amid these swarms of people his own activities were inconspicuous. To-morrow he and his

mother would be forgotten in some new sensation.

The air was delicately fresh and wholesome, and the faces of the girls he met had singular power to comfort him. The life of the city, sweeping on multitudinously, refreshed him like the spray of a mighty torrent foaming amid rocks and shadowed by lofty cañon walls. He returned to his vigil stronger and better for this momentary communion with the crowd.

Mrs. Joyce came again at nine and insisted on remaining for the night. She had quite thrown off her own gloom, being perfectly certain in her own mind that Lucy Ollnee would return with a marvelous story of her wanderings "on the other plane."

She began to make plans for Victor, "subject," she said, "to revision by your 'guides.'"

"You've said that before," he retorted, "but I have no 'guides.' I don't believe in 'guides,' and I don't intend to be ruled by a lot of spooks."

"Be careful," she warned. "They know your every thought and they may resent your attitude."

"Well, let them! What do I care? Suppose, for argument's sake, that these Voices *do* come from my father and my grandfather. What do they know of this great city? They were country folks. How can they direct me in what I am to do?"

"They know a great deal better than any of us."

"But how can they?"

"Because they are free from the limitations of the flesh."

"I don't see how that is going to help them. Their minds are just the same as they were, aren't they?"

"Indeed no! We grow inconceivably in knowledge and power to discern the moment we drop the flesh."

"I don't see why? If they are existing they're in a world so different from this that their experience here won't help them over there, and their experience over there is of no value to us here, and even if it were, they could not express it."

During their talk the night had deepened into darkness, and now, as they reached a pause in their discussion, a measured rapping could be heard, as though some one were striking with a small wand upon the brass rod of the bed.

Without knowing exactly why, a thrill very like fear passed over Victor, but Mrs. Joyce smiled. "They are here! Don't you hear them? They want to communicate with us."

The youth's high heart sank. His boyish dread of darkness began to people this death-chamber with monstrous shadows, with malignant forces. He was very grateful for the presence of this cheery and undismayed believer in the spirit world. Without her he would have been panic-stricken.

She rose to enter the bedroom, and he followed as far as the threshold.

It was very dark in there, and for a moment he could see nothing, could hear nothing. Then a faint whisper made itself distinctly audible just above his head. "*Victor, my boy,*" it said.

He did not reply for a moment, and Mrs. Joyce eagerly called, "Did you hear that whisper, Victor?"

"Yes, I heard it," he replied.

"It was Lucy. Was it you, Lucy?" asked Mrs. Joyce.

"*Yes,*" came the answer.

"Are you still out of the body, Lucy?"

"*Yes.*"

"What shall we do?"

"*Wait.*"

"Is there anything you want to say to Victor?"

"*No, not now. Father will speak.*"

Silence again fell, and in this pause Mrs. Joyce took the chair which stood close beside the bed and motioned Victor to another near the foot. He sat with thrilling nerves, moved, trembling in spite of himself. The room was now quite dark, save for a faint patch of light on the ceiling and another on the carpet. His mother's body could not be distinguished from the covering of the bed.

As they waited, a singular, cold, and aromatic breeze began to blow over the bed from the dark corner, and then a small, brilliant, bluish flame

arose near the sleeper's head, and, floating upward to the ceiling, vanished silently. It was like the flame of a candle twisted and leaping in a breeze.

"The spirit light!" exclaimed Mrs. Joyce, ecstatically. "Wasn't it beautiful? And see, there is a hand holding it!" she whispered, as another flame arose. "Can't you see it?"

"I see the light, but no hand," he replied.

"I can see more. I see the dim form of an old man outlined on the wall. It must be your grandsire, Nelson Blodgett. Am I right?" she asked, apparently of the dark.

Victor could now perceive a thin, bluish, wavering shape, like a cloud of cigar smoke, and from this a whisper seemed to come, strong and clear. "*Yes, I have come to speak to my grandson.*"

"Don't you see him now?" asked Mrs. Joyce.

"I see nothing," he repeated; and as he spoke the misty shape vanished.

"But you heard the whisper, did you not?" Mrs. Joyce persisted.

He did not reply to her, but rose and bent above his mother. "Mother, did you speak?" he asked.

Mrs. Joyce excitedly restrained him. "Sit down! You must not touch her now."

"Why not?"

"Because it is very dangerous while the spirits are using her organism."

"I don't know what you mean?" he retorted, angrily. "I know that that voice sounded exactly like my mother's voice, and I want to know—"

"*Silence, foolish boy!*" was sternly breathed into his ear.

A cloud passed over the sky, and as the room became perfectly black a fluttering gray-blue cloud developed out of the darkest corner. It had the movement of steam-wreaths, with each convolution faintly edged with light. At one moment it resembled a handful of lines, fine as cobweb, looping and waving, as if blown upward from below, and the next moment it floated past like the folds of some exquisite drapery, lifting and falling in gentle undulations. At last it rose to the height of a man, drifted across the bed, and there hung poised over the head of the sleeper. As it swung there for an instant Victor could plainly detect a man's figure and face. His eyelids were closed and his features vague, but his chin and the spread of his shoulders were clearly defined. "Who are you?" Victor demanded, as if the apparition were an intruder.

The answer came in a flat, toneless voice, neither male nor female in quality. "*I am your father.*"

Victor leaped up impulsively, his hair on end with fright, and the apparition vanished precisely as though an open door had been closed between it and the observer.

Again Mrs. Joyce clutched him. "Be careful! Sit down; don't stir!"

"Somebody is playing a joke on me," he insisted, hotly. "I'm going to strike a light."

Again a voice, this time almost full-toned, but with a metallic accompaniment, as though it had passed through a horn, poured into his ear, "*You shall bow to our wisdom.*"

He braced himself to receive a blow, and answered through his set teeth: "I will not. I am master of myself, and I don't intend to take orders from you."

"*You are fighting great powers. You will fail,*" the voice replied. "*Your heart is defiant. Expect punishment.*"

Victor threw out his left hand in rage. It came into contact with something in the air, something light and hollow, which fell crashing to the floor, and a faint, gasping, indrawn breath from the sleeper on the bed followed it. For an instant all was silent; then Mrs. Joyce cried out:

"She has returned! Your mother has returned! Don't strike a light. Wait a moment." She moved forward a little. "May I touch her?" she asked.

Victor thought she was speaking to him, but before he could reply the invisible one whispered: "*Yes. Approach slowly.*"

Mrs. Joyce laid her hand on the sleeper's brow. "She's warmer, Victor! She's breathing! She has certainly come back to us."

"*Approach*," whispered the voice in Victor's ear.

He moved forward now, in awe and wonder, and stood beside the bed. Slowly the room lightened, and out of the darkness the pallid face of his mother developed like the shadowy figures on a photographic plate. She was lying just as before, save for one hand, which Mrs. Joyce had taken. He laid his own vital, magnetic palm upon her arm, and finding it still cold and pulseless, called out:

"Mother, do you hear me? It is Victor."

Her fingers moved slightly in response, and this minute sign of life melted his heart. He fell upon his knees beside her bed, weeping with gratitude and joy.

VIII

VICTOR REPAIRS HIS MOTHER'S ALTAR

IN consenting to the removal of his mother to Mrs. Joyce's home Victor had no intention of receding from his position. On the contrary, he considered it merely a temporary measure—for the night, or at most for a few days. He entered the car, thinking only of her wishes, and when he watched her sink to sleep in her spacious and luxurious bed under Mrs. Joyce's generous roof he couldn't but feel relieved at the thought that she was safe and on the way back to health. It was only when he left her and went to his own splendid chamber that his nervousness returned.

Every day, every hour plunged him deeper into debt to these strangers; and the fact that they were treating him like a young duke was all the more disturbing. He fancied Carew saying of him, as he had said of another, "Oh, he's merely one of Mrs. Joyce's pensioners," and the thought caused him to burn with impatience.

Nevertheless he slept, and in the morning he forgot his perplexities in the joy of taking his

breakfast with Leonora. He admired her now so intensely that his own weakness, irresolution, and inactivity seemed supine. He was impatient to be doing something. His hands and his brain seemed empty. With no games, no tasks, he was disordered, lost.

They were alone at the table, these young people, and naturally fell to discussing Mrs. Ollnee's marvelous return to life. This led him to speak of his own plans. "My course at Winona fitted me for nothing," he acknowledged, bitterly. "I should have gone in for something like mechanical engineering, but I didn't. I had some fool notion of being a lawyer, and mother, I can see now, was all for having me a preacher of her faith. So here I am, helpless as a blind kitten."

It was proof of his essential charm that Leonora not only endured his renewed harping on this harsh string, but encouraged him to continue. "I know you chafe," she said. "I had that feeling till I began my course in cooking, and just to assure myself that I am not entirely useless and helpless in the world, I'm now going in for a training as a nurse."

"A nurse!" he exclaimed. "Oh, that explains something."

"What does it explain?"

"I wondered how you could be so calm and so efficient yesterday."

She seemed pleased. "Was I calm and effi-

cient? Well, that's one result of my study. I can at least keep my head when anything goes wrong."

"I don't think I like your being a trained nurse," he said.

She smiled. "Don't you? Why not?"

"You're too fine for that," he answered, slowly. "You were made to command, not to serve. You should be the queen of some castle."

His frankly expressed admiration did not embarrass her. She accepted his words as if they came from a boy. "Castles are said to be draughty and dreadfully hard to keep in order, and besides, a queen's retainers are always getting sick, or killed, or something, so I think I'll keep on with my training as a nurse."

"But there must be a whole lot of unpleasant, nasty drudgery about it."

"Sickness isn't nice, I'll admit, but there is no place in the world where care and sympathy mean so much."

"You don't intend to go out and nurse among strangers?"

"I may."

"I bet you don't—not for long. Some fellow will come along and say 'No more of that,' and then you'll stay home."

"What sort of fiction do you read?" she asked, with the air of an older sister.

"The truthful sort. Your nursing is nothing but a fad."

"What a wise old gray-beard you are!"

He was nettled. "You need not take that superior tone with me. I'm two years older than you are."

"And ten years wiser, I suppose you would declare if you dared."

"I didn't say that."

"No; your tone was enough. I admit you know a great deal more about baseball than I do."

He winced. "That was a side-winder, all right. If I knew as much about the carpenter's trade or the sale of dry goods as I do about 'the national game' I'd stand a chance of earning my board."

"Why not join the league?" she suggested. "They pay good wages, I believe."

He took this seriously. "I thought of that, but even if I could get into a league team, which is hardly probable, it wouldn't lead anywhere. You see, I'm getting up an ambition. I want to be rich and powerful."

"Football players have always been my adoration," she responded, heartily. "You'd look splendid in harness. Why don't you go in for that?"

"You may laugh at me now," he replied, bluntly. "But give me ten years—"

"Mercy, I'll be too old to admire even a football captain by that time."

"You'll be only thirty-one."

She sobered a little. "Men have the advantage. You will be young at thirty-three, and I'll be—well, a matron. No, I'm afraid I can't wait that long. I must find my admirable short-stop or half-back, whichever he is to be, long before that."

He changed his tone and appealed to her seriously. "Really now, what can I do? So long as this persecution of my mother keeps up I'm in for a share of it. I can't run away, for I promised I wouldn't. So I remain, like a turkey with a string to his leg, walking round and round my little stake. What would you do in my place? Come now, be good and tell me."

She responded to his appeal. "Don't be impatient. That's the first thing. Be resigned to this luxury for a few days. The Voices will tell you what to do. They may be planning a surprise for you."

"All I ask of them is to quit the job and let me plan things for myself," he slowly protested.

The entrance of Mrs. Wood, senior, ended their dialogue, and he went away with a sense of having failed to win Leo's respect and confidence, as he had hoped to do. "She considers me a kid," he muttered, discontentedly. "But she will change her mind one of these days."

He spent the morning with his mother, but toward noon he grew restless and went down into the library, wherein he had observed several bound volumes of the report of The Psychical

Society. He fell to reading a long article upon "multiple personality," and followed this by the close study of an essay on hysteria, and when Mrs. Joyce called him to lunch he was like a man awakened from deep sleep. These articles, filled with new and bewildering conceptions of the human organism, were after all entirely materialistic in their outcome. Personality was not a unit, but a combination, and the whole discussion served but to throw him into mental confusion and dismay.

At lunch Mrs. Joyce proposed that they all take an automobile ride round the city and end up with a dinner at the Club; and seeing no chance for doing anything along the line of securing employment, Victor consented to the expedition.

The weather was glorious, and the troubled youth's brain cleared as if the sweet, cool, lake wind had swept away the miasma which his experience of the darker side of the city had placed there. He surrendered himself to the pleasure, the luxury of it recklessly. How could he continue to brood over his future with a lovely girl by his side and a sweet and tender spring landscape unrolling before him?

They fairly belted the city in their run, and in the end, as they went sweeping down the curving driveway of the lake, Mrs. Ollnee's face was delicately pink and her eyes were bright with happiness. To her son she seemed once more the

lovely and delicate figure of his boyhood's admiration. It seemed that her death-like trance had been a horrible dream.

The ride, the club-house, the dinner, were all luxurious to the point of bewilderment to Victor, but he did not betray his uneasiness. He was only a little more silent, a little more meditative, as he took his place at the finely decorated table in the pavilion which faced upon the water. He determined (for the day at least) to accept everything that came his way. This recklessness completely dominated him as he looked across the board at Leonora, so radiant with health and youth.

No one would have detected anything morbid in Mrs. Ollnee. She was prettily dressed and not in the least abnormal, and Victor was proud of her, even though he knew that her dresses were earned by a sort of necromancy.

Mrs. Joyce carefully avoided any discussion of his problem, and the dinner ended as joyfully at it began. They rode home afterward, under the bright half moon, silent for very pleasure in the beautiful night.

The park was full of loiterers, two and two, and on the benches under the trees others sat, two and two together. It was mating-time for all the world, and Victor's blood was astir as he turned toward the stately girl whose face had driven out all others as the moon drowns out the stars. His audacity of the morning was

gone, however. He looked at her now with a certain humble appeal. His subjugation had begun.

At the house they all lingered for an hour on the back porch, which looked out upon a little formal garden. Two slender trees stood there, and their silken rustling filled in the pauses of the conversation like the conferring voices of a distant multitude of infant seraphim.

"Those must be cottonwoods," Victor remarked.

"They are," replied Mrs. Joyce. "I love them. When I was a child I used to visit a farm-house in whose yard were two tall trees of this sort, and their murmur always filled me with mystical delight. I used to lie in the grass under them, hour by hour, trying to imagine what they were saying to me. Ever since I had a place of my own I've had cottonwood-trees in my yard. I know they're a nuisance with their fuzz, but I love their rustling."

As she paused, the leaves uttered a pleased murmur, and Victor, listening with a new sense of the sentiment which his hostess concealed in a plump and unimposing form, thought he heard a sibilant whispered word in his ear. "Victor," it said, "I love you."

He turned quickly toward his mother, but she seemed not to be listening, and a moment later she spoke to Mrs. Joyce, uttering some pleasant commonplace about the night.

This whisper was so clear, so unmistakable, that Victor could not doubt its reality. The question was which of the women had spoken it. He had a foolish wish to believe that Leo had uttered it. He listened again, but heard nothing.

As he was helping his mother slowly up the stairs to her room, he said: "This is all very beautiful, mother, but I can't enjoy it as I ought. I feel like a fraud every time I see Mrs. Joyce handing out one of those big bills. I suppose she can afford it, but I can't. We must get back to the old place, or to some new place, and live on our own resources."

"We can't do that till morning, dear. Let us wait until The Voices speak. They have been silent to-day. Perhaps they will advise us to-morrow."

Here was the place to tell her of the whispers he had heard, but he could not bring himself to do so.

She went on: "I wish you would repair my table, your grandfather's table, as you promised, Victor. I don't know why, but it helps me. But you must be careful not to use any metal about it."

"Why not?"

"Oh, that's another one of the mysteries. They seem to object to metal."

"Well, I'll get at it to-morrow," he said, and kissing her good-night, went to his own room.

He was awake and dressed before six the next

morning, and leaving a note for Mrs. Joyce, set out for California Avenue. On the way he dropped into a cheap café and got a breakfast which cost him twenty cents. He enjoyed this keenly, because, as he said, it was in his class and was paid for out of the money his mother had given him for his trophy.

All was quiet at the flat, and setting to work on the table with glue and stout cord, he soon had it on its legs. Looking down upon it as a completed job, he marveled at the reverence which his mother seemed to have for it, and his mind reverted to the astounding phenomena which he himself had witnessed over its top.

Picking up one of the folded slates, he opened it with intent to see if it held any hidden springs or false surfaces. Out fluttered a folded paper. This he snatched up and studied with interest. It was a peculiar sort of parchment, veined like a bit of corn-husk, and on it, written in delicate and beautiful script, were these words: "*Go to Room 70, Harwood Bldg., to-day. Danger threatens. Altair.*"

"I wonder who Altair is," he mused, staring at the bit of paper, "and what is the danger that threatens?"

While still he stood debating whether to go down-town or to warn his mother, a heavy step on the stairs announced a visitor. The man (for it was plainly the tread of a man, and a fat man) knocked on the door, but did not pause for reply.

"Are you there, Lucy?" he called, and came in.

Victor faced him with instant resentment of this familiarity. "Who are you? What do you want here?" he demanded.

The other, a tall, clumsy, broad-faced individual in costly clothing, seemed surprised and a little alarmed. "I came to see Mrs. Ollnee," he explained. "Who are you?"

"I am her son—and I want to know how you dare to push into my mother's house like this!"

"My name is Pettus," he answered, pacifically. "No doubt you've heard vour mother speak of me."

"Oh yes," responded the youth. "I heard Mr. Carew speak of you. You're president of that Transportation Company they're all so wild about."

A shade of apprehension passed over Pettus's fat, ugly face. "Carew! You've seen him? I suppose he gave me a bad name? But never mind—where will I find your mother?"

Victor didn't like the man, and he remained silent till Pettus repeated his question, then he answered, "I can't tell you where my mother is."

"You mean you won't!"

"Well, yes, that's what I do mean."

Pettus turned away. "I can find her without your aid."

"What do you want with her?"

"I want a sitting at once!"

"You keep away from her!" Victor blazed out. "I don't want her sitting for you. She's mixed up too deeply in your affairs already. Carew said—"

"I don't care what Carew said—and I don't care whether you approve of your mother's sitting for me or not. Her controls will decide that question."

He tramped out and down the stairway, and from the window Victor saw him whirl away in his automobile. "That man's a scoundrel and a slob," he said; "a greasy old slob. I will not have my mother sitting for such people. Can't I head him off somehow?"

With sudden resolution he ran down the stairway and over to the telephone booth on the corner. He got the butler at once, and was deeply relieved to find that his mother was out with Mrs. Joyce. "He can't see her before I do," he concluded, as he hung up the receiver. "I'll go over there and wait for her to return."

As he neared the house he met Leo coming out with some letters in her hand, and with the swift resiliency of youth, he asked if he might not walk with her.

"Certainly," she said; "I want to talk with you about your plans."

"I haven't any plans," he said.

"What have you been doing this morning?"

He hesitated a moment, then answered: "I've been mending that old table—I suppose you heard about my smashing it?"

"Yes; and it seemed a very childish thing to do."

"If you knew how I hate that business and everything connected with it!"

"I do, and it seems absurd to me. Your mother's life is very wonderful and very beautiful to me."

He changed the subject. "Did that man Pettus call just now?"

"Yes."

"He's a scoundrel—that chap. A four-flusher."

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, the very looks of the man."

She laughed. "He isn't pretty, but he's a very decent citizen—and has a lovely wife and two daughters."

"He's a slob—his face gives him away—and besides, Mr. Carew the other night—"

"I know," she interrupted; "Mr. Carew is sure we're all going to be ruined by your mother and the Universal Transportation Company."

"I hope you haven't put your money into anything Pettus has control of?"

"Oh, don't let's talk business on a morning like this. It's criminal—let's talk about trees and birds and flowers." She might have added "and love," for when youth and spring-time meet, even on a city boulevard, love is the most important subject in the encyclopedia of life. So they walked and talked and jested in the way

of young men and maidens, and Victor talked of himself, finding his life-history vastly absorbing when discussed by a tall girl with a splendid profile and a cultivated voice. He watched her buy her stamps at the drug-store, finding in her every movement something adorable. The poise of her bust and her fine head appealed to him with power; but her humor, her cool, clear gaze, checked the crude compliments which he was moved to utter. She could not be addressed as he had been accustomed to address his girl class-mates at Winona.

This walk completed the severance of the ties which bound him to the university. His desire to return to his games weakened. His ambition to shine as an athlete faded. He wished to prove to this proud girl that he was neither boy nor dreamer, and that he was competent to take care of himself and his mother as well.

As they were re-entering the house, he said: "Don't utter a word of what I've told you. I'm going to test whether my mother has the power to read my mind or not."

"I understand," she returned, "and I'm glad you're going to share in our séance to-night."

He frowned. "Don't say 'séance.' I hate that word."

She laughed. "Aren't you fierce! But I'll respect your prejudices so far as an utterly unprejudiced person can."

"Do you call yourself an unprejudiced person?"

"I try to be."

"But you're not. You have a prejudice against me," he insisted, forcing the personal note.

"Oh, you're quite mistaken," she replied; "in fact I think you're rather nice—for a boy." And she went away, leaving him to fume under this indignity.

Mrs. Joyce and Mrs. Ollnee came in soon afterward, and they all took tea together quite as casually as if they were not on the edge of something very thrilling and profoundly mysterious. Mrs. Joyce politely asked Victor what he had been doing, but his answers were evasive. He made no mention of Pettus, though he was burning with desire to warn her against him.

Soon afterward they went to his mother's room, and once safely inside the door he turned upon her. "Mother, are you going to sit for Pettus to-night?"

"I expect him, but I'm not sitting for him specially."

"I won't have him in the circle! He is a slimy old beast. I hate him—and Mr. Carew warned us against him. He wasn't guessing, mother, he *knows* that this old four-flusher is up to some deviltry. How did he find you?"

"He called us up."

"I simply will not have him sit with you again, and you must not advise any one to put a cent into his concern. Where are you going to have this performance?"

"I thought of sitting here, but I need the old table. You mended it, didn't you?"

"Yes, I mended it."

"And you had a message from *Altair?*"

"How did you learn that?"

"I felt it," she answered, gravely. "She said danger threatened—did she tell you what the danger was?"

"No; who is *Altair* supposed to be?"

"She is a very pure and high spirit—a girl of wonderful beauty—so they say. I have never seen her myself—she told me to-day that she would watch over you."

At this moment a whisper was heard in the air just above her head.

"*Lucy!*"

"Yes, father."

"*Take the boy—sit—the old place. Leave Pettus out.*"

"Yes, father."

"*I will be there. Pettus is under investigation.*"

"Much obliged," said Victor; and then he heard close to his ear a faint whisper: "*Victor, you shall see me—Altair.*"

He was staring straight at his mother's lips at the moment, and yet he was unable to detect any visible part in the production of the voice. She explained the whisper. "Altair is smiling at you. She says she will be with us to-night."

All this was very shocking to Victor. Utterly disconcerted and unable to confront her at

the moment, he left the room. The whole problem of her mental condition, the central kernel of her philosophy was involved in that one whisper. To solve that was to solve it all. It was not so much a question of how she did it, it was a question of her right to deceive him.

He seized the time between tea and dinner to return to the library. For an hour he dug into the spongy soil of metaphysics, and it happened that he fell at last upon the Crookes and Zöllner experiments (quoted at greater length in a volume of collected experience) and found there clear and direct testimony as to the mind's mastery of matter. There was abundant evidence of the handling of fire by the medium Home, and Slade's ability to float in the air was attested by well-known witnesses, but beyond this and closer to his own day, he came upon a detailed study of an Italian psychic with her "supernumerary hands," a story which should have made the materialization of a letter seem very simple. But it did not. All the testimony of these great men, abundant as it was, slid from his mind as harmlessly as water from oiled silk. Apparently, it failed to alter the texture of his thought in the slightest degree. His world was the world of youth, the good old wholesome, stable world, and he refused to be convinced.

At dinner he was angered, in spite of Leo's presence, by his mother's returning confidence and ease of manner. His own position had been

weakened, he felt, by his acquiescence in the sitting. His desire to satisfy himself, to solve his mother's mystery, had led him to abandon his stern resolution—and he regretted it. He ate sparingly and took no wine, being resolved to retain a perfectly clear head for the evening's experiment. He was grateful to Leo for keeping the talk on subjects of general interest, even though he had little part in it, and his liking for her deepened.

As he neared the test he began to sharply realize that for the first time in all his life he was about to take part in one of his mother's hated "performances," and his breath was troubled by the excitement of it. "I will make this test conclusive," he said to himself, and his jaw squared. "There will be no nonsense tonight."

The papers of the day had remained free from any further allusion to "the Spiritual Blood-Suckers," and it really seemed as if the cloud might be lifting, and this consideration made his participation in the sitting all the more like a return to a lower and less defensible position. He was irritated by the methodical action with which his mother proceeded to set the stage for her farce. Wood, who seemed quite at home, assisted in these preparations, leaving Victor leaning in sullen silence against the wall.

Mrs. Joyce took a seat directly opposite the little psychic, Wood sat at her left, while Victor,

with Leo at his right, completed the little crescent. Mrs. Ollnee, with her small, battered table before her, faced them across its top. Victor made no objection to this arrangement, but kept an alert eye on every movement. He watched her closely. She first breathed into one of the horns and put it beside her, then held one of the slates between her palms for a little time. "I hope this will be illuminated to-night," she said.

This remark gave Victor a twinge of disgust and bewildered pain. "She is too little and sweet and fine to be the high priest of such jugglery," he thought, but did not cease his watchful attention, even for an instant.

The locking of the door, the turning out of the light and the taking hands in the good old traditional way all irritated and well-nigh estranged him. Why should his life be thrown into the midst of such cheap and ill-odored drama? "This shall never happen again," he vowed, beneath his breath.

There was not much talk during the first half-hour, for the reason that Victor was too self-accusing to talk, and the others were too solemn and too eager for results to enter upon general conversation. For the most part, they spoke in low voices and waited and listened.

The first indication of anything unusual, aside from the tapping, was a breeze, a deathly cold wind, which began to blow faintly over the table from his mother, bearing a peculiar perfume (an

odor like that from some Oriental rug), which grew in power till each of the sitters remarked upon it. This current of air continued so long and so uninterruptedly that Victor began to wonder. Could it be his mother's breath? If she were not fraudulently producing it, then it must be that some window had been opened. The network of her deceit—if it was deceit—thickened.

Mrs. Joyce then said, in a low voice: "We are to have celestial visitors to-night. That is the wind which accompanies the astral forms."

"Yes," said Leo, "and that perfume always accompanies Altair. Are we to see Altair?" she softly asked.

A sibilant whisper replied, "*Yes, soon.*"

A moment later, another and distinctly different voice called softly, "*My son.*"

"Who is it?" asked Victor.

"*Your father.*"

"What have you to say to me?"

"*The power of the mind is limitless,*" the whispered voice replied. "*Matter, the strongest steel, is but a form of motion.*"

"What is all that to me?" asked Victor.

"*As you think so you will be. Be strong and constant.*"

The vagueness of all this increased Victor's irritation. "What about Pettus?"

The voice hesitated, weakened a little. "*I can't tell—not now—I will ask.*"

What followed did not come clearly and consecutively to Victor, for Mrs. Joyce (who was expert in hearing and reporting the whispers) repeated each sentence or the substance of it to him. But he himself heard a considerable part of it. In the very midst of a sentence the voice stopped. It was as if a wire had been cut, or the receiver hung up; the silence was like death itself.

Victor called out to his mother: "Can you hear The Voices, mother? They seem to come from where you are."

She did not reply, and Mrs. Joyce explained. "She is gone."

Again the cold breeze set in, with a strong, steady swell, and with it was borne a low, humming note, which grew in volume and depth till it resembled the roaring rush of a November blast through the branches of an oak. It became awesome at last, with its majesty of moaning song, and saddening with its somber suggestion of autumn and of death. It opened the shabby little room upon an empty and limitless space, upon an infinite and vacant and obscure desert wherein night and storms contended. It died away at last, leaving the air chill and pulseless, and the chamber darker than before.

Before any comment could be made upon this astounding phenomenon, Victor perceived a faint glow of phosphorus upon the table. It increased in brilliancy till it presented a clear-cut square

of some greenish glowing substance, and then a large hand in a ruffled sleeve appeared above it as if in the act of writing.

"It is Watts," whispered Leo. "He is writing for us."

Bending forward, Victor was able to read this message outlined in dark script on the glowing surface of what seemed to be the slate: "*The dreams of to-day are the realities of to-morrow.*" These words faded and again the shadowy hand swept over the table, and this companion sentence followed: "*The realities of to-day will be but the half-truths or the gross errors of the future.*

"*WATTS.*"

Victor was strongly tempted to clutch this hand, but fear of something unpleasant prevented him from doing so. He was sick with apprehension, with dread of what might happen next. A feeling of guilt, of remorse, came upon him. "I am to blame for this!" he thought, and was on the point of rising and calling for the lights, when something happened which changed not merely his feeling at the moment, but the whole course of his life, so incredible, so destructive of all physical laws, of all his scientific training was the phenomenon. A hand, large and shapely, took up the glowing slate and held it like a lamp to his mother's face, so that all might see her. She sat with hands outspread upon the table, her head thrown back, her eyes closed. Her arms extended in rigid lines. It seemed

that the invisible ones desired to prove to Victor that his mother could not and was not holding the slate.

Swift as light the glowing mirror disappeared, and then, as if through a window opened in the air before his eyes, Victor perceived a strange face confronting him, the face of a girl with deep and tender eyes, incredibly beautiful. Her eyes were in shadow, but the pure oval of her cheeks, the dainty grace of her chin, the broad, full brow and something ineffably pure in the faintly happy smile, stopped his breath with awe. He forgot his mother, his problems, his doubts, in study of the unearthly beauty of this vision.

Mrs. Joyce whispered in ecstasy, "It is Altair!"

The angelic lips parted, and a low voice, so gentle it was like the murmur of a leaf, replied, "*Yes, it is Altair.*" And to Victor her voice was of exquisite delicacy. "*Believe, be faithful.*"

No one breathed. It was as if they had been permitted to gaze upon one of heaven's angelic choir. How came she there? Who was she? Before these questions could be framed she disappeared, silently as a bubble on the water, leaving behind only that delicious, subtle, unaccountable odor as of tropic fruits and unknown flowers.

Leo, breathing a sigh of sad ecstasy, exclaimed: "Is she not beautiful? Never has she shown herself more glorious than to-night."

Victor was like one drugged and dreaming. There was no question of his mother's honesty

in his mind. He did not relate the vision to her, and he winced with pain as Leo spoke. He wished to recall the face, to hear that whisper again. The effect upon him was enormous, instant, unfolding. In all his life nothing mystic, nothing to disturb or rouse his imagination had hitherto come to him, and now this transcendent marvel, this face born of the invisible and intangible essence of the air, beat down his self-assurance and destroyed his smug conception of the universe. He lost sight of his hypothesis and accepted Altair for what she seemed, a gloriously beautiful soul of another world, a world of purity and light and love.

He remained silent as Mrs. Joyce rose and went to his mother. He was still in his seat when they turned up the lights. Leo spoke to him, but he did not answer. Strange transformation! At the moment her voice jarred upon him. She seemed commonplace, prosaic, in contrast with the woman who had looked upon him from the luminous shadow.

Gradually the walls he hated, the entangling relationship he feared, returned upon him; and though he realized something of the revealing character of his reticence, he had not the will to break it. He watched his mother return to her normal self with such detachment that she at last became aware of it and lifted her feeble hands in search of him. "Victor, come to me!" she pleaded.

He went to her then, still in a daze, and to her question, "Did your father come?" he replied, brokenly, "A voice came, but I can't talk about that now—I must go out into the air."

All perceived the tumult—the strange psychic condition into which he had been thrown, and were considerate enough to refrain from pressing him with inquiry. "He has been touched by 'the power,'" whispered Mrs. Joyce to Leo. "He's under conviction."

The cool, clear air and the material rush of the city throbbing in upon his brain restored the youth to something like his normal self; but he remained silent and distraught all the way home.

As they entered the hall Leo glanced at his face with unsmiling, penetrating intensity, and in that moment perceived that Victor the boy had given place to Victor the man. She experienced a swift change of relationship, and a pang of jealousy shot through her heart. She realized that the wondrous spirit face was the power that had so wrought upon and transformed him. She, too, had thrilled to the mystical beauty of the phantom, and she had read in the tremulous lips the hesitating whisper, a love for the young mortal, which had troubled her at the moment, and which became more serious to her now.

They said good-night as strangers; he absorbed, absent-minded; she resentful and a little hurt.

HE REPAIRS HIS MOTHER'S ALTAR

To his mother, when they were alone in her room, he said, haltingly: "Mother, you must forgive me. I thought you did those things—unconsciously cheating—but now—I—give it up. I believe in you absolutely."

She raised her eyes to his wet with happy tears. "My son! My splendid boy!" she said, and in her voice was song.

IX

THE LAW'S DELAY

"BELIEF," says the wise man, "is not a matter of evidence; it is a habit of mind." And notwithstanding his confession of inward transformation, Victor found doubt still hidden deep in his brain when he woke the following morning. His conviction had been temporary.

In his musing upon Altair he began to remember some very curious details. He recalled that at first glance he had inwardly exclaimed, "How much she looks like Leo!" The lips and chin were similar, only sadder, sweeter—and the poise of the head was like hers also. But the brow and the eyes were more like his mother's. It was as though Altair were at once the heavenly sister of Leonora and the spirit daughter of his mother, and the love which lay on the tremulous lips, the deep, serious eyes, moved him still with almost undiminished power. He was eager to see the celestial face again.

He was less clear about his own physical condition at the time. He remembered feeling weak and chilled, as though some of his own vitality

had gone out of his blood in the attempt to warm that unaccountable being into life. He recalled his parting with his mother as if it were the incident in a painful dream. It was all impossible, incredible, and yet—it happened!

His morning mood was eager and searching. He was quite ready to see Leo, ready to talk with her of all that had taken place. Hitherto he had avoided any detailed story of his mother's evocations, but now he was violently curious to know whether or no she had ever performed these particular rites before. He wished to hear all that Leo had to say, and he was deeply disappointed when neither she nor his hostess appeared at the breakfast table.

He finished his meal hurriedly (as soon as it became evident that he was to be alone), and instead of going down-town returned to the library to reread the famous story of Sir William Crookes and "Katie King"—every word of which had acquired new meaning to him. He thrilled now to the calm, bald narrative, reading between the lines the inner story of the great scientist's bewildered love for the stainless vision which he had evoked but could not endow with lasting life.

The boy dwelt upon the scene of their parting with peculiar pain, perceiving in it new pathos. A throb of sorrow came into his throat. Was Altair but a transitory flower of the dark—aloof, intangible, and sad? What meant the wistful

sweetness of her smile? Was she unhappy in the icy realms from which she came? Did she long for human companionship? Would she come again? He found himself longing for the night and another sitting with his mother. He felt vaguely the disappointment which comes to those who listen to the messages of these celestial apparitions, so commonplace, so vaporous, so inane. "Katie King," surpassing all earthly women in her physical loveliness, brought no sentence of intellectual distinction from the mysterious void which was her home.

In the midst of this astounding narrative he heard Leo's voice in the hall, and with a guilty start put his book away and rose to meet her, remembering that he had not treated her very well after the sitting, though he could not recall the precise reason for it. Gradually her step, the sound of her voice, reasserted their charm, and he returned to the breakfast-room like a boy who has been sullen and knows it, but hopes to be forgiven.

His shamefaced entrance disarmed her resentment, and in her merry smile of greeting the dream face faded away. The marvelous vision of the night lost its dominion over him, and he became again the son of the morning.

The girl openly mocked him. "You look pale and sheepish. What have you been doing?"

"I've been reading about 'Katie King.' Do you believe that story?"

"We must believe it when a man like Sir William Crookes tells it. Do you believe what you saw and heard last night?"

"No, I don't. How can I?"

"You seemed to believe in the vision of Altair," she persisted, eying him archly. "You were carried away by her wonderful beauty. I don't blame you. Her loveliness is beyond anything on this earth. A vision like that of sublimated womanhood, purified of all its dross, is very hard on us mortals. Altair doesn't find it necessary to eat eggs and toast, as I am doing this minute. I'm a horribly vulgar and common creature I know, and I ought to apologize, but I won't. I like being a normal human being, and if you don't like to see me eat you may go away."

"I like nothing better than to see you eat, and I've just had a couple of eggs myself. I was hoping all the time you would come down and join me, but you didn't."

"I didn't get to sleep as usual last night," she confessed, with a change of tone. "Altair came to me and kept me stirred up till nearly two o'clock."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she hung about my bed, tapping and sighing incessantly for what seemed like hours."

"Could you see her?"

"Part of the time. Finally I turned up the light and got rid of her."

He sat in silence for a few moments, then burst out wildly.: "Are we all going crazy together? When I hear you talk like that it makes me angry, and it makes me sad. I never met such people before. What does it all mean? Seems like everybody around my mother is bitten by this ghost-bug."

"You, too," she accused. "You caught a little of the madness last night."

"I did, I admit it; but I'm going to throw it off. I won't have any more of it."

"Is your curiosity satisfied?"

"No, it is not; but I'm not going to desert the good old sunny world I know for the kind of windy graveyard we faced last night. Even the eyes of Altair were sad. Did you notice it?"

"Yes, I did," she admitted. "And that's one of the things I can't understand. The spirits all *say* they are happy, but they *look* wistful, and their voices indicate that they are filled with longing to return."

"I'm going to break out of this circle of my mother's converts," he passionately declared. "I've got to do it, or 'll get all twisted out of shape like the rest of you. I'm going to try again to-day to reach some man who has never heard of a psychic. I'm going to some big mill and apply for manual labor. There's something uncanny in the way I'm kept circling around mother's cranky patrons. I'll get batty in the steeple if I don't get help. Let's go out for a

walk in the park. Let's forget we're immortal souls for an hour or two. I want to see a tree. Let's go to the ball game—and to the theater to-night—that'll take all the money I have left, and leave me just square with the world, so I can jump into the lake to-morrow without anybody else's money in my pocket. Come, what do you say?"

She perceived something more than humor in his noisy declamation, and accepted his challenge. "I'll go you," she slangily replied; "just wait till I get my walking-togs on."

"You've got to hurry," he warned. "I'm going to get out of this house before anything crazy happens to me. Meet me down at the corner of the boulevard."

He left the room with intent to avoid both his mother and Mrs. Joyce. At the moment he wished to remove himself from any further argument, and his longing for the trees and the park was a genuine reaction from his long stress of the supernatural. "My search for a job can go over till to-morrow," he decided.

He was sufficiently recovered from his bewilderment, his pain of the night before, to glow with pleasure as he saw Leonora swinging along toward him. "She carries herself well," he said.

She was dressed in a light-gray skirt and jacket, and her white hat had a long, gray quill which waved back over the rim, giving her the jaunty air of a yacht under reefed sail. Her face was

brilliant with color, and her eyes were alight with humor. "Aunt Louise wanted to know where we were going, and I said 'St. Joe, Michigan.'"

He pretended not to see the joke. "St. Joe; why St. Joe?"

As she caught his stride she demurely answered, "If you don't know, it's not for me to explain."

"I suppose people *do* go to St. Joe for other purposes than marriage?"

"It is possible, but they never get into the newspapers. We only hear of the young things who beat their angry parents by just one boat." She changed her tone. "Where *shall* we go?"

"I don't object to St. Joe."

She pretended to be shocked. "How sudden you are! We've only known each other two days."

"Three. However, we might make it a trial marriage. You could put me on probation."

"After your display of inconstancy last night I wouldn't trust you even for a probationary engagement."

He harked back to the vision of Altair. "She *was* beautiful, wasn't she? Did she really exist, or was it merely some sort of hallucination?"

"I thought you weren't going to discuss these subjects?"

He assented instantly. "Quite right. Give me a crack on the ear every time I break out. I wish I were a robin. See that chap on the

lawn! His clothes grow of themselves, and as for food, all he has to do is to tap on the ground, and out pops a worm."

"I prefer roast beef and asparagus tips; and as for wearing the same feathers all the time—horrible!"

In such wise they talked, touching lightly on a hundred trivial subjects, yet carrying the remembrance of Altair as an undertone to every word. They walked up the boulevard to the Midway, then through the park to the lagoon, and the sight of the water cheered Victor. "A boat!" he cried. "Us for a boat-ride."

He was a skilled and powerful oarsman (she had never seen his equal), and his bared arms, the roll of his splendid muscles, were a delight to her eyes.

He exulted as the water cried out under the keel. "This is what I needed. I've been without a chance to kill something, or beat somebody, for three or four days. I am cracking for lack of exercise. Walking isn't exercise."

The heavy boat, under his sweeping strokes, cut through the water like a canoe, and the girl on the stern seat watched him with dreaming eyes, her air of patronization lost in contemplation of his skill, her hands on the tiller-rope, her attitude of ease and irresponsibility typifying the American woman, just as his intense and driving action represented the American man.

He traversed the entire length of the lagoon

before his need of muscular activity was met; then they drifted, exclaiming with pleasure over the charming vistas which every turn of their boat afforded. The catbirds were singing in the willows, and the banks were white and yellow with flowering shrubs, and over all the clear sunlight fell in cascades of gold. The wind was from the lake, cool but not chill; and every leaf glistened as if newly burnished. The day was perfect spring, and under its influence the two beings, young and ardent, inclined irresistibly toward each other.

The girl, who, up to this moment, had been indifferent, not so say scornful, of the advances of men, gave herself up to the pleasure which the companionship of this young giant afforded her. Altair and all that she represented were very far and faint, dimmed, burned away into nothingness by the vivid sun of this entrancing day.

For hours they explored the lagoons, talking nonsense, the divine nonsense of youth, or sitting idly and gazing at each other with the new-born frankness of lovers. At last she said, "I'm hungry, aren't you?"

"As a wolf," he responded.

"Shall we go home?"

"Home? I have no home. No, let's camp right here in the park. There must be a lunch counter somewhere."

"There's something better than a lunch counter. There's the German Building."

"I'll stand you for a beer and sandwich," he shouted. "Show it to me."

Returning the boat to the landing, he paid his fee with a satisfied smile. "I never gave up forty-five cents with better grace in my life," he said to her.

She led the way to the café in the German Building, and there they ate and drank in modest fashion, while he expressed his gratitude for her guidance. "I owe you all I've got," he declared, displaying his little handful of money. "You've shown me another side of the city's life. It isn't so bad, this wild life of Chicago. We'll come again. *Will* you come again?" He bent a frankly pleading gaze upon her.

"Indeed I will. I love it here; but Aunt Louise prefers to ride about in the car. However, you haven't seen all the park yet. You must see the prairies at the south end, and the Spanish caravels, the convent—all the marine side of it. Let's walk down the beach."

He was glad to accept her guidance in this matter also, and they set off down the curving walk, slowly, as if they found each new rood of ground more enjoyable than that already traversed. He had a feeling that nothing so sweet, so perfect as this day's companionship could ever again come to him, and he lingered over each view as if determined to extract its every possible phase of enjoyment, and when two paths presented themselves, he shamelessly advised

taking the longer one. So they came to The Old Convent, to The Caravels in The South Lagoon, and at last to The Sand Hills. This was the climax of their walk. These dunes were so different from anything he had ever seen, so remote, so suggestive, and so flooded with the light of his own growing romance, that they seemed of another and strangely beautiful land.

Taking seats upon the grass in the sunlight, which was just warm enough to be delightful, they absorbed the scene in silence, entranced by the sails, the far water-line, the sun, the wind, and the fluting of the birds. The few people who drifted by were unimportant as shadows; and Leo took no thought of time till a cloud crossed the sun and the wind felt suddenly chill; then she rose. "We must go home, or they'll certainly think we've gone to St. Joe."

He returned to his jocular mood. "If I had ten dollars I'd ask you 'why not?'"

"I wouldn't consent if you had a million."

He pretended to be astonished. "You would not? Why?"

"Because I believe in the pomp and circumstance of matrimony. No runaway marriages for me! When I marry, it shall be in a vast cathedral, with a mighty organ thundering and a long procession of awed and shivering bridesmaids."

"I'm sorry your tastes run in that way. I don't, at this time, feel able to gratify them."

"Nobody asked you, sir," she said; then looking about her, she sighed deeply. "I hate to leave this place. It seems as though it could never be so beautiful again. Haven't we had a heavenly day?"

"I dread going back to the town, for then my needs and all my life problems will swarm."

"I wish I could help you," she said, sincerely.

"You can," he earnestly assured her. "If you will only come out here with me now and again I shall be able to stand a whole lot of 'grief.'"

They were walking westward at the moment, past the golf-course, and a sense of uneasiness filled the girl's heart. She looked up at him with a grave face. "I don't know why, but I feel an impulse to hurry. I feel as though we ought to get home as quickly as possible. They may be worried about us."

He did not share her apprehension. "I don't think they'll suffer."

"Something urges me to run," she repeated. "We must go directly home."

He quickened his step with hers, responding to the anxiety which had come into her tone, but experiencing nothing of it in his heart. What he did feel was the certainty that his day of careless ease was over. The sky seemed suddenly to have lost its brightness. The birds had fallen silent. The crowds of people seemed less festive. The world of work-worn men rolled

back upon them in a noisy flood as they caught a car and went speeding down the squalid avenue. Leo's anxiety seemed to increase rather than to lessen as they neared her home. "There's been some accident!" she insisted. "I can't tell what it is, but I think your mother has been hurt."

He could not believe that anything serious had happened to his mother; but when they alighted to walk across the boulevard he was quite as eager to reach the house as she.

The man at the door wore an expression of well-governed concern, which led Leo to sharply ask: "What is it, Ferguson? What has happened?"

"They have taken her, Miss."

"Taken? Who? What? Who have taken her?"

"The bailiff, Miss."

"The bailiff?"

"Yes, Miss, the officers came with a warrant just as Mrs. Ollnee was sitting down to luncheon, and it was ever as much as she could do to get them to wait till she had finished. Mrs. Joyce has gone with her."

Leo confronted Victor with large eyes. "That was the precise moment when I had my sensation of alarm."

Victor was white and rigid with indignation. "Where did they take her?"

"To the Bond Street Station, sir. You are to come at once."

"How do I get there?"

"I'll show you," volunteered Leo. "Is the electric out, Ferguson?"

"I don't think so, Miss."

"Order it around at once." She turned to Victor. "Don't worry. Aunt Louise is not easily rattled. She is able to command all the help that is necessary. She will have her own lawyer and will see that everything is done to shield your mother from harm."

He was aching with remorseful fear. "Oh, if we had not stayed so long," he groaned, all the beauty and charm of the morning swept away by a wave of guilt. "Only think! I left the house without a word of greeting to her! Doesn't it show that there is no peace or security for either of us so long as we remain here? I have tried twice to get away from this, and now—"

The electric carriage came smoothly to the door, and Leo, dismissing the driver, motioned Victor to enter. "I'll drive," she said; and they swept out of the gate and down the boulevard as if, by a wafture of the hand, this young girl had invoked the aid of an Oriental magician.

The run was easy and swift, till they reached the crowded cross-street which led westward into the city deeps; and as the carts thickened and coarse and vicious humanity began to swarm Victor was moved to assert the man's prerogative. He resented the admiring glances which

the loafers addressed to his companion, and a feeling of awkward helplessness came upon him. "I wish you'd let me run this car," he said, morosely.

Slowly they felt their way to the west, straight on toward a great railway depot, with Leo deftly winding her way amid trucks and express wagons, darting past clanging street-cars, and plowing through swarms of nondescript men and slattern women, till at last she halted on a crossing, and, leaning from the window, inquired of the police officer the way to the Bond Street Station.

"Right around the corner, Miss," he replied, with a smile, pointing the way with his club.

She turned up a narrow alley which ran parallel with the great domed shed of the railway, and drew up before an ugly doorway in a grimy brick building of depressing architecture.

Victor alighted with a full realization of having left heaven for a filthy, squalid hell. The clang and hiss of engines in the shed, the jar of heavy trucks, the cries of venders, the grind and howl of cars, the sodden stream of humankind, deafened and appalled him. Nevertheless, he took the lead into the gloomy anteroom of the station, which was half filled with officers in uniform escorting or placidly watching dull-hued, depressed, and unkempt men and women in arrest.

On inquiry of another officer, they were di-

rected to the door of a long hall, which was in effect a tunnel. "You'll find your party in the court-room," the officer said.

Victor led the way through this battered hallway, and at the end of it came into a large, bare room lighted with dusty windows on the north. It was in effect a hall divided in halves by an open railing. In the eastern end of the chamber the judge was seated surrounded by his clerks examining a little group of silent men. In the western half of the room, outside the railing, sat a somber and motley assemblage of negroes, Italians, and Greeks, mostly young, each presenting a savage and sullen face. In the midst of such a throng of miscreated beings Leo seemed of angelic loveliness and purity.

Before the crowd became aware of her, the keen-eyed girl had discovered the objects of their search. "There they are," she whispered, pointing to the corner at the judge's right, where Mrs. Joyce and Mrs. Ollnee were seated, in close conversation with a dark, smoothly-shaven man of middle age. "Oh, I'm so glad," she added, "Mr. Bartol is with them."

She led the way, quite fearlessly, through the aisle and directly up to the gate, where she was met by the bailiff, or warden of the room, a sullen-faced, sloppy Irishman. He was too keen-eyed not to be immediately impressed by her beauty and something strong and clear and fine in her glance, but before he had time to ask

her what she wanted the gentleman whom she called Bartol came forward, and at his touch the officer gave way respectfully, and the two young people entered the inclosure.

Mrs. Ollnee rose upon seeing Victor, and lifted her arms to his neck. "Oh, I'm so glad you've come," she murmured, in deep relief.

A rustle of profound interest passed over the court-room, and such shuffling of feet and murmur of voices arose that the bailiff rapped querulously on the railing with the handle of his mallet and glared, in a vain effort to restore silence. Even the judge, accustomed as he was to every phase of the human comedy, turned a sympathetic gaze upon the girl. He was a middle-aged man, with a pale and sensitive careworn face, and as he resumed his address to the men before him his gentle voice could be heard above the roar of the street in grave reprimand. The sodden convicts who stood unshaved and spiritless before him excited his pity not his wrath.

Victor sat down beside his mother, whispering, "What is it all about?"

Mr. Bartol answered: "Pettus, the president of the People's Bank, has absconded; the bank is closed, and your mother has been arrested for complicity in his frauds."

Victor understood almost instantly, for this was exactly what Carew had warned him about on the night of his first dinner in Mrs. Joyce's house. "What can we do?" he asked.

"Leave that to me," replied Bartol. "I will see that your mother is protected."

As they sat thus, waiting, while the judge disposed of a wife-beating case, Victor thought of Altair and the mournful and exquisite smile with which she had greeted him. What a frightful gulf gaped between these savage and bestial men—these sullen, pinched, grimy, and malodorous street-walkers, these sottish, half-human creatures, torn and bloody with one another's claws—and the celestial vision which his mother, by some inexplicable necromancy, had been able to create from the sunless world of her magic! What a measureless stretch lay between this clamorous, automatic, pitiless court (with its weary judge) and the sunny bank beside the lagoon, whereon the birds were singing and where he and Leo had so lately lain to gaze on the far horizon land of wedded happiness and love!

Upon his musing the sounding voice of the clerk broke. "*Thomas Aiken* vs. *Lucile Ollnee*."

Led by Mr. Bartol, Mrs. Ollnee and Mrs. Joyce moved through the gate and stood before the judge, while from the right the complainant and his witnesses and his lawyer came to oppose them. Victor followed his mother and stood at the extreme left, with Leo by his side. He had no care of what the miserable spectators in the seats would think of them. He was only concerned with the judge and the opposing counsel.

Upon the motion of the clerk, the bailiff called out, "Hold up your hands, everybody," and so they all, including even Leo, held up their right hands and took the oath that what they were about to say would be the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help them God.

The judge, worn by the ceaseless stream of diseased, ineffectual, and halting humanity passing daily before his eyes, gazed in surprise and growing interest upon this group of handsome and well-dressed people while the prosecuting attorney presented the claims of the complaining witness, charging the defendant with conspiring to rob or defraud one, Mary Aiken.

"Where is Mrs. Aiken?" asked the judge.

"She is too ill to appear, your honor," replied the prosecuting attorney, "but her granddaughter is here prepared to give in detail the story of how the defendant, who professes to be a medium, induced her aged and infirm grandmother to withdraw her money from certain investments in her native town and put them into the hands of another—namely, the absconding president of the People's Bank, thereby impoverishing her. Thomas Aiken, the complainant, charges that the said defendant, Lucile Ollnee, has by her uncanny powers obtained large sums of money, and that she should be punished as a swindler."

The judge studied the faces of the witnesses

before him, then asked, "What have you to say to this, Mrs. Ollnee?"

"It is false," she replied.

The prosecution put in a word. "You will not deny that you advised these investments?"

"I advised nothing," she retorted. "What my controls advised I only know in a general way."

"What do you mean by 'controls'?" inquired the judge.

"I am a spirit medium, and sometimes a trance medium," she replied, facing him steadily. "Those whom men call the dead speak through me."

"In what way?"

"Partly by writing, partly by means of voices."

"Do you mean to say that the dead speak in voices audible to others than yourself?"

"Yes, your honor, they often speak so loud that any one may hear them. For the most part they whisper."

The prosecution again struck in. "These voices are a part of the trick, a part of her method of luring her victims on to do her will."

The judge turned to the complainant, Thomas Aiken, a dark-faced, sullen young man. "Have you heard these voices, Mr. Aiken?"

"No, sir; I never had a séance; but my sister has had a number of interviews with this woman. I know that in spite of the advice of her friends my grandmother has been induced to give away

her money to this woman and to that scoundrel, Pettus. We have been robbed by her. It amounts to that, and we intend to stop it."

The judge turned back to Mrs. Ollnee. "Do you wish to be tried here and now on this charge?"

Mr. Bartol interposed. "No, your honor, we do not. This case is a very peculiar one. My client is a lady, as you may see, and should never have been brought into this court in this fashion. That she is a medium is probably true; but there is no evidence of deceit on her part. She assures me of her absolute faith in these Voices, and her manner carries conviction. Her friends believe in her also. She claims to be nothing more than the means of communication between this world and the world of the dead."

The judge smiled faintly. "That is claiming a good deal—from my point of view. What have you to say to that?" he demanded, turning again to the complainants.

A clear, low, musical voice, the voice of a young woman, answered, "The case is not uncommon, your honor."

Victor, craning his head forward, found himself looking directly into the big, intense black eyes of the girl he had rebuffed on the stairway the first day of his stay. She was vivid, intense, and very indignant as she said: "The woman pretends to be possessed of the power of communication with the dead, and by her arts

she convinced my grandmother that her dead husband wished the withdrawal of her money from a bank in Moline, and that he recommended its investment in this traction company. She played remorselessly upon the most sacred emotions of my poor old grandmother, and I have evidence to prove that this advice has been a part of a general scheme whereby this traction company, a fake concern, has been able to delude other creduluous souls."

As she paused her lawyer said, wearily: "It is a plain case of swindling, your honor, and we desire to press the case to its limit at once, for Pettus cannot be found, and we fear the flight of the defendant."

Mr. Bartol spoke suavely. "Your honor, it is not 'a plain case of swindling.' Mrs. Ollnee is the personal friend of Mrs. John H. Joyce, whose name you know very well. It is true that messages were given advising the investment of funds in the traction company, but not only has this advice been followed by Mrs. Joyce, but by the defendant herself, who has kept all her own small savings in the same bank."

The judge turned to Mrs. Ollnee. "Is this true?"

"It is, your honor."

The judge spoke to Mrs. Joyce. "You believe in this woman's Voices?"

"I do."

"Yet they have advised you to put your money into the hands of a swindler."

"Her Voices seem to have done this, yes, sir; but she herself has never advised in any way."

"You distinguish between the Voices of your friend and her own personality, do you?"

"I do, yes, sir."

The prosecuting attorney inserted a sneering word. "Your honor, Mrs. Joyce is known to be credulous and under the influence of this trickster. She is not a competent witness. She has permitted herself to be deluded to the point where she will not believe anything ill of her medium. Thomas Aiken is not the only one ready to press this charge against the defendant. Four others to my knowledge stand ready to testify to this woman's uncanny power for deluding and defrauding. My client finds herself stripped of her little fortune and helpless in her declining years. The acting of this medium is criminal, and we demand that she be punished."

The judge turned his musing eyes upon Mrs. Ollnee's pale face. "Have you anything further to say, Mrs. Ollnee?"

"I have never been guilty of any deception, your honor. I claim no wisdom for myself. If it is true that the traction company is a fraud, then it must be that lying spirits have spoken impersonating my husband and my father."

"That is a subterfuge," interposed the young woman, Miss Aiken. "She is responsible for her Voices."

"You accept money for your services, do you not?" the judge asked of Mrs. Ollnee.

"Not now, no sir."

"Did you formerly?"

"Yes, sir, after my husband died, I was forced to do so in order to educate my son."

"Is this your son?"

"Yes, sir."

The judge addressed himself to Victor. "What do you know of your mother's power as a medium? Do you share her faith?"

Victor felt the burning eyes of the angry girl upon him as he replied: "I know very little about it, your honor. I have been away to school ever since I was ten years old."

"Mrs. Joyce, you are a believer in Mrs. Ollnee's powers?"

"I am, a firm believer."

"You've had no reason to doubt the genuineness of these messages?"

"Up to the present time I have not."

"You will lose heavily in this traction swindle, if it is a swindle, will you not?"

"If it has failed, yes, sir."

"Does that shake your faith in the medium?"

"Not in the slightest, your honor. It is a well-known fact that lying spirits sometimes interpose."

During this interrogation, which had proceeded in conversational tone, they had all remained standing before the judge, whose specu-

lative eyes wandered from face to face with growing interest. At last he said to the prosecuting attorney: "From your own statement of it, this case is not to be tried here. I do not feel myself competent at this time to pass upon the questions involved."

"She shall not escape," said Miss Aiken, with bitter menace.

Mr. Bartol interposed. "We demand a trial by jury, your honor."

"You shall have it," responded the judge.

The Aikens withdrew sullenly, and the bailiff indicated that the defendant and her party might retire to an inner office while papers were being prepared; and this they did. This room proved to be a bare, bleak place, with benches and yellow wooden chairs, as ugly as a country railway station, wherein a few officers were carelessly lounging about. They all gazed curiously at Mrs. Ollnee and Leo, and one of them muttered to the other, "It's not often that a classy bunch like that comes into court."

The indignity of it all caused Leo to forget her own share in the traction company's failure. "It is shameful that you should be dragged here," she said, when the door closed behind them.

"Leo!" cried Mrs. Ollnee, in agonized voice. "Do you realize that this failure means almost as much of a loss to you as it does to Louise?"

This affected the girl only for an instant.

Then she loyally said: "Yes, I know. But I do not blame you for it."

Mrs. Ollnee turned to her son. "If all they say is true, Victor, we are the victims of some lying devils—"

Leo soothingly laid her hand on her arm. "Let us not think about that just now. Let us wait until we are safely out of this dreadful place."

Victor perceived that his mother was shaken to the very deeps of her faith. She was trembling with excitement and weakness, and his anxiety deepened into a fear that she might faint. "There are devils here," she whispered. "I feel them all about me—bestial, horrible—take me away!"

"Can't we go now?" he asked of the officer, who seemed to have an eye on them. "My mother is not well."

"Wait till the bail is fixed up," the officer replied, pleasantly but inexorably.

They remained in silence till Mrs. Joyce and Mr. Bartol appeared. Then Victor hurried his mother out into the street, eager to escape the desolating air of this moral charnel-house. It was by no means a perfectly pure atmosphere without, but it was fresher than within, and Mrs. Ollnee revived almost instantly. "Oh, the swarms of unclean spirits in there!" she said, looking back with a face of horror.

Mrs. Joyce put her into the car with Leo and told them to go directly home, while she, with

Victor, took Mr. Bartol to his office. Victor, stunned by the new and crushing blow which had fallen upon him, turned to the great lawyer with a boy's trust and admiration. "What can we do?" he asked, as soon as they had taken their seats in the car.

Mr. Bartol did not attempt to make light of the case. His dark, strong face was very grave as he answered: "For the present we can do very little beyond getting our bearings. It seems to me at the moment as though the whole question hinged upon the possibility of dual personality, and so far as I am concerned, I have no mind upon that matter. I must give it attention before I can reply. Our immediate concern is to keep your mother from further trouble and assault. If, as the prosecution stated, there are others in this fight, they and the press can make it very unpleasant for you all. Miss Florence Aiken has a powerful and vindictive pen. She will not cease her persecution—for she is at the bottom of the case."

Mrs. Joyce turned to him with eager face. "I wish you would invite Mrs. Ollnee and her son up to your farm for a few days."

"I do so with pleasure. I am going up tonight on the eight-o'clock train, and I shall be very glad to have them go with me, if they care to do so. We can then talk the whole case over at our leisure and in quiet. Perhaps you can run up and stay over Sunday with us."

"That is the very thing," she responded; "and I'm very grateful to you."

Again Victor felt himself helpless, whirling along in a stream of alien purpose like a leaf in a mountain torrent, and again he abandoned himself to its sweep. "I will do anything to get away from here," he replied.

Mr. Bartol went on: "Your mother's case will not come up for some days, and the rest and quiet of the farm will do you both good." To Mrs. Joyce he added, privately: "The whole matter interests me vastly. I don't at all mind giving some time to it, and, besides, I like the young man."

Mrs. Joyce dropped the lawyer at his office door and sped homeward swiftly, with intent to overtake Leo. She did not attempt to conceal her anxiety. "The truth is, Victor, Pettus and his friends called into our circle a throng of wicked, deceiving spirits. They were not what they claimed to be. They were cheats, and they have almost ruined us. Your poor, sweet mother is not to blame, and I can't blame the Aikens. What I cannot understand is this—Why did your father and his band permit these treacherous personalities to intervene? Why did they not defend her from these demons?"

Victor listened to her with a complete reversal to disbelief as regards his mother's mediumship. He forgot the marvels of the direct writing, the mighty murmuring wind, the dream-face of

Altair; all these insubstantial and evanescent perceptions were lost, submerged by the returning sea of his doubt. He saw, too, that Leo's faith was shaken. He felt it beneath her brave-spoken words. The whole question of the process, as well as the content of the messages, was reopened for her. His situation grew ever darker. His way was again blocked. He could not leave his mother to her fate, and yet he could not see his way to earning a cent of money while this horrible accusation was hanging over her. He acknowledged, too, a very definite feeling of sympathy with those who had been defrauded. There was moral indignation in Miss Aiken's tremulous eagerness to punish. "She's not to blame," he said. "I'd do exactly as she is doing if I were in her place."

X

A VISIT TO HAZEL GROVE

BARTOL, attended by porters and greeted by conductors and brakemen, led the way to the parlor-car in a stern abstraction, which was his habit. Victor studied him closely and with growing admiration. He was not tall, but his head was nobly formed and his broad mask of face lion-like in its somber dreaming. In repose it was sad, almost bitter, and in profile clear-cut and resolute. His dress was singularly tasteful and orderly, with nothing of the careless celebrity in its color or cut, and yet no one would accuse him of being the dandy. He was naturally of this method, and gave little direct thought to toilet or dress.

Mrs. Ollnee looked upon him as her rescuer, one who had snatched her from loathsome captivity; but his manner did not invite repeated and profuse thanks. With a few words of polite explanation, he took a seat behind his wards, unfolded his newspaper, and forgot them till the conductor came through the car; then he remembered them and paid their fares.

Mrs. Ollnee was not merely awed by his powerful visage and searching eyes; she was profoundly stirred by some psychic influence which emanated from him. She whispered to Victor: "He is very sad. He is all alone. He has lost his wife and both his children. He has no hope, and often feels like leaving this life."

Victor did not take this communication as a "psychometric reading," for he had been able to discern almost as much with his own eyes, and, besides, all of its definite information Mrs. Joyce might have furnished; but his mother added something that startled him. She said: "The Voices say, '*Obey this man; study him. He will raise you high!*'"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know," she replied. "That is the way I hear it. I hear other Voices—they say to me, '*Comfort him.*'"

Victor was not in a mood for "voices," and cut her short by asking in detail about her arrest. "Who came for you? A policeman?"

"Yes, but not in uniform. They were very nice about it. At first I was terribly frightened. I was afraid I should have to go in the patrol-wagon, but we were allowed to ride in the car, the policeman sitting with the driver—"

Victor groaned. "Oh, mother, why did you give out *business* advice!"

"I gave what was given to me," she responded.

"Think of the disgrace of being in that court-room!"

"I didn't mind the disgrace," she replied; 'but it swarmed with horrible spirits. Each one of those poor criminals had a cloud of other base, distorted, half-formed creatures hovering about him. It was like being in a cage with a host of obscene bats fluttering about." She shuddered. "It was horrible! It was a sweet relief when you and Leo came, for a new and happy band came with you. You helped my band drive away the cloud of low beings that oppressed me; and now there is something calming and serenely helpful all about me. It comes from Mr. Bartol. I am no longer afraid; I am perfectly serene."

Victor made no attempt at elucidating her exact meaning; there was something depressing to him in this continued dependence upon spirit guidance, a guidance that had led them into so much trouble and discredit. He sat by the window, watching the faintly-outlined moonlit landscape flowing past, feeling himself to be a very small insect riding on the chariot of the king of tempests, with no power to check the speed or direct the course of his inflexible driver. His own future was but a flutter of vague shadows, his boyhood a serene, sun-warm meadow, now swiftly receding into the darkness of night. Would anything so beautiful ever come again?

His mother, sitting as if entranced, was looking down at her folded hands, her brow unlined;

but a plaintive droop in the lines of her sensitive mouth told that she was wearied and secretly disheartened.

"Poor little mother!" he said, laying a hand on her arm, "you are tired."

The tears came to her eyes, but she smiled back radiantly. "I don't care what comes, if only you believe in me," she said, simply; and he took her hand in both of his and pressed it like a lover.

At last Mr. Bartol folded his paper and put away his glasses. "Well, we are nearing Hazel Grove," he announced, smilingly. "It's only a little village, a meeting of cross-roads, but I think you'll like the country; it's the fine old rolling prairie of which you've heard."

The moon was riding high as they alighted from the coach upon the platform of a low, wooden station in the midst of green fields. A clump of trees, and the lights in dimly discerned houses, gave only a faint suggestion of a town; but an open carriage was waiting for them, and entering this, they were driven away into the most delicious and fragrant silence.

Instantly the last trace of Victor's anger and unrest fell away from him. Of this simple quality had been the scenes of his life at school. In such peace and serenity his earlier years had been spent; indeed, all his life, save for the few tumultuous days in the city—and he was immediately restored and comforted by the

sounds, sights, and odors of the superb spring night.

"Isn't it glorious!" he cried. "I feel as if I were reaching God's country again."

The swiftly stepping horses whirled them up the street through a bunch of squat buildings and out along a gently rising lane to the south. Ten minutes later the driver turned into a large, tree-shaded drive, and over a curving graveled drive approached a spreading white house, whose porticos shone pleasantly in the moonlight. A row of lighted windows glowed with hospitable intent, and tall vases of flowers showed dimly.

"Here we are!" called Mr. Bartol, with genial cordiality. "Welcome to Hazeldean."

To dismount before this wide porch in the midst of the small innumerable voices of the night was like living out some delicious romance. To come to it from the reek and threat of the court-room made its serene expanse a heavenly refuge, and the beleaguered mother paused for a moment at the door to look back upon the lawn, where opulent elms and maples dreamed in the odorless gloom. "I have never seen anything so peaceful," she breathed. "Only heavenly souls inhabit here."

The interior was equally restful and reassuring. Large rooms with simple and substantial furnishings led away from a short entrance hall. The ceilings were low and dark, and the lamps shaded. Books were everywhere to be seen,

many of them piled carelessly convenient to lights and chairs, as if it were both library and living-room.

The first word Victor spoke related to the books, and Mr. Bartol replied with a smile.

"They are not especially well chosen. I fear you'll find them a mixed lot. I read nothing but law in the city—here I indulge my fancy. You'll wonder what my principle of selection is, and, if you ask me, I must answer—I haven't any. I buy whatever commends itself to me at the moment. One thing leads to another—romance to history, history to poetry, poetry to the drama, and so on." He greeted a very tidy maid who entered the room. "Good-evening, Marie. This is Mrs. Ollnee, and this is her son, Mr. Victor Ollnee. Please see that they are made comfortable." Then again to his guests. "You must be tired."

"I am so, Mr. Bartol," replied Mrs. Ollnee, "and if you'll pardon me I'll go to my room."

"Certainly—and you may go, too, if you feel like it," he said to Victor.

"I am not sleepy," replied Victor.

"Very well," replied his host. "Be seated and we'll discuss the situation for a few minutes."

He led the way to a corner where two wide windows opening on the lawn made delicious mingling of night air and study light, and offering his guest a cigar, took a seat, saying: "I run out here whenever the city becomes a burden.

I find I need just such a corrective to the intense life of the city. It is my rule to give no thought to legal troubles while I am here; hence the absence of codes and all legal literature. You are a college man, Mrs. Joyce tells me."

"I was at Winona last Saturday, and expected to stay there till June, when I was due to graduate. Then the devil broke loose, and here I am. When will my mother's case come up?"

"Not for some weeks, I fear. If you wish to return to your studies we can arrange that."

"No. I'm done with school. I'm only worried about my mother. What do you think of her case, Mr. Bartol?"

"I'm not informed sufficiently to say," he replied, slowly. "The whole subject of hypnotic control seems to be involved. I must know more of your mother before I can even hazard an opinion. The theories of suggestion are all rather vague to me. I have only what might be called a newspaper knowledge of them; but I have some information as to your mother's profession I gained from my friend Mrs. Joyce, so that I am not entirely uninformed. Besides, it is a lawyer's business to know everything, and I shall at once proceed to bore into the subject."

Mrs. Ollnee returning brought him to his feet in graceful acknowledgment of her sex, and placing a chair for her, he said, "I hope you don't mind tobacco."

"Not at all," she replied, quite as graciously.

He placed a chair for her so that the light fell upon her face, and she knew that he intended to study her as if she were a page of strange text.

"I'm glad you like it here," he said, in answer to her repeated admiration of his home, "for I suspect you'll have to stay here for the present. The city is passing through one of those moral paroxysms which come once in a year or two. Last year it was the social evil; just now it concerns itself with what the reformers are pleased to call 'the occult fakers.' The feeling of a jury would be against you at present, and as I have promised Mrs. Joyce to take charge of your defense, I think it well for you to go into retirement here while I take time to inform myself of the case.'

"I do not like to trouble you."

"It is no trouble, my dear madam. Here is this big home, empty and completely manned. A couple of guests, especially a hearty young man, will be a godsend to my cook. She complains of not having men to feed. Don't let any question of expense to me trouble you."

"Thank you most deeply."

"Don't thank me; thank Louise Joyce, who is both client and friend, and the one to whom I owe this pleasure." He bowed. "I never before had the opportunity of entertaining a 'psychic,' and I welcome the opportunity."

She did not quite know how to take him, and neither did Victor; and perceiving that doubt, Bartol added: "I am quite sincere in all this. I hear a good deal, obscurely, of this curious phase of human life, but never before have I been confronted by one who claims the power of divination."

"Pardon me, sir, I do not claim such power."

"Do you not! I thought that was precisely your claim."

"No, sir, I am a medium. I report what is given to me. I divine nothing of myself. I am an instrument through which those whom men call 'the dead' speak."

"I see," he mused. "I will not deceive you," he began again, very gravely. "This charge against you is likely to prove serious, and you must be quite frank with me. I may require a test of your powers."

"I am at your service, sir. Make any test of me you please—this moment if you like."

"I will not require anything of you to-night. Writers tell me that 'mediums' are a dark, elusive, and uncanny set, Mrs. Ollnee, and I must confess that you upset my preconceptions."

"There are all kinds of mediums, as there are all kinds of lawyers, Mr. Bartol. I am human, like the others."

"If you will permit me, I will take up your defense along the lines of hypnotic control on the part of this man Pettus."

"I cannot presume to advise you, sir, but you must know that to me these Voices come from the spirit world. I am the transmitter merely—for instance, at this moment I hear a Voice and I see behind you the form of a lady, a lovely young woman—"

"Mother!" called Victor, warningly. "Don't start in on that!"

"Proceed," said Bartol; "I am interested."

The psychic, leaning forward slightly, fixed her wide, deep-blue eyes upon him. "The maid conducted me to the room which had been your wife's, but I could not stay there. This lady who stands beside you took me by the hand and led me away to another room. She is nodding at me now."

"Do you mean the maid led you from the room?"

"No, I mean the spirit now standing behind you led me here. She says her name is Margaret Bartol. She said: '*Comfort my dear husband. Restore his faith.*' She is smiling at me. She wants me to go on."

Bartol's face remained inscrutably calm. "Where does the form seem to be?"

"At your right shoulder. She says, '*Tell him Walter and Hattie are both with me.*' She listened a moment. She says, '*Tell him Walter's mind is perfectly clear now.*'"

Victor thought he saw the lawyer start in surprise, but his voice was cold as he said, "Go on."

"She says: '*Tell him the way is open. I am here. Ask him to speak to me.*'"

Bartol then spoke, but his tone plainly showed that he was testing his client's hallucination and not addressing himself to the imaginary ghost. "Are you there, Margaret?"

"*Yes*," came the answer, clearly though faintly.

The renowned lawyer gazed at the medium with eyes that burned deep, and presently he asked, "What have you to say to me?"

Again came the clear, silvery whisper: "*Much. Trust the medium. She will comfort you.*"

Victor thrilled to the importance of this moment, and much as he feared for his mother's success, he could not but admire the courage which blazed in her steady eyes. She was no longer afraid of this mighty man of the law, to whom heaven and hell were obsolete words. She was panoplied with the magic and mystery of death, and waited calmly for him to continue.

At last he said: "Go on. I am listening."

Again through the flower-scented, silent room the sibilant voice stole its way. "*Father.*"

"Who is speaking?"

"*Margaret.*"

"Margaret? What Margaret?"

"*Your 'rascal' Peggy.*"

Bartol certainly started at this reply, which conveyed an expression of mirth, but his questions continued formal.

"What is your will with me?"

"*Mamma is here—and Walter.*"

"Can they speak?"

"*They will try.*"

Again silence fell upon the room—a silence so profound that every insect's stir was a rude interruption. At length another whisper, clearer, louder, made itself heard: "*Alexander, be happy. I live.*"

"Who are you?"

"*Your wife.*"

"You say so. Can you prove your identity?"

The whisper grew fainter. "*I will try. It is hard. Good-by.*"

Bartol raised his hand to his head with a gesture of surprise. "I thought I felt a touch on my hair."

"The lady touched you as she passed away," Mrs. Ollnee explained. "She has gone. They are all gone now."

"I am sorry," he said, in polite disappointment. "I wanted to pursue the interrogation. Is this the usual method of your communications?"

"This is one way. They write sometimes, and sometimes they speak through a megaphone; sometimes they materialize a face or a hand."

He remained in profound thought for a few moments, then starting up, spoke with decision: "You are tired. Go to bed. We'll have plenty of time to take up these matters to-morrow.

Please feel at home here and stay as long as you wish."

A little later he took Victor to his room, and as they stood there he remarked, "Of course, all this may be and probably is mind-reading and ventriloquism—subconscious, of course."

"But the writing," said Victor. "You must see that. That is the weirdest thing she does. It is baffling."

"My boy, the whole universe is baffling to me," his host replied, and into his voice came that tone of tragic weariness which affected the youth like a strain of solemn music. "The older I grow the more senseless, hopelessly senseless, human life appears; but I must not say such things to you. Good-night."

"Good-night," responded Victor, with swelling throat. "We owe you a great deal."

"Don't speak of it!" the lawyer commanded, and closed the door behind him.

Victor dropped into a chair. What a day this had been! Within twenty-four hours he had seen and loved the dream-face of Altair and had been blown upon by the winds from the vast chill and empty regions of space. He had resented Leo's voice in the night, but had returned to her in the light of the morning. On the dreamy lagoon he had been her lover again, pulling at the oar with savage joy, and on the grass in the sunlight he had been the man unafraid and victorious. Then came the hurried

return, the visit to the court, the rescue of his mother—and here now he lay in the charity bed of his mother's lawyer! "Truly I am being hurried," he said; and recalling Miss Aiken's final menacing remark, he added: "And if that girl and her brother can do it mother will be sent to prison." Much as he feared these accusing witnesses, he acknowledged a kind of fierce beauty in Florence Aiken's face.

As he lay thus, thinking deeply yet drowsily upon his problems, he heard a faint ticking sound beneath his head. It was too regular and persistent to be a chance creaking of the cloth, and he rose and shook the pillow to dislodge the insect which he imagined might have flown in at the window.

The ticking continued. "I wonder if that *is* a fly?"

The ticking seemed to reply, "No," by means of one decided rap. To test it, he asked, "Are you a spirit?"

The tick counted one, two, three—"*Yes.*"

"Some one to speak to me?"

Tick, tick, tick—"Yes."

The answer was so plainly intelligent that the boy, silent with amazement, not unmixed with fear, lay for a few minutes in puzzled inaction. At length he asked, "Who is it—Father?"

"Tick"—No.

"Grandfather?"

"*No.*"

He hesitated before asking the next question. "Is it Altair?"

"*No.*"

He thought again. "Is it Walter Bartol?"

The answer was joyously instant. "*Yes, yes, yes!*"

"Do you wish to speak to me?"

"*Yes.*"

"About your father?"

"*Yes.*"

"Through my mother?"

Now came one of those baffling changes. The answer was faintly slow, "Tick, tick," betraying uncertainty—and succeeding queries elicited no response.

Victor, excited and eager, would have gone to his mother for aid had he known where to find her room. The mood for marvels was upon him now, and Altair and Margaret, and all the rest of the impalpable throng, seemed waiting in the dusk and silence to communicate with him. Hopelessly wide awake, he lay, while the big clock on the landing rang its little chime upon the quarter hours, but no further sign was given him of the presence of his intangible visitor; and at last the experience of the day became as unsubstantial as his dreams.

He was awakened by the cackling of fowls and the bleating of calves and lambs. The sun was shining through the leafy top of a tree which lay almost against his window, and happy

shadows were dancing like fairies on the coverlet of his bed.

"It sounds like a real farm!" he drowsily murmured, filled with the peace of those cries, which typify the most ancient and unchanging parts of the cottager's life.

He had known only the poetic side of farm life. He had seen it, heard it, tasted it only as the lad out for a holiday, and it all seemed serene and joyous to him. To his mind the luxury of quietly dozing to the music of a barn-yard was the natural habit of the farmer. He did not attempt to rise till he heard the voice of his host from the lawn beneath his window.

A half an hour later he found Bartol in the barn-yard surveying a span of colts which his farmer was leading back and forth before him. They were lanky, thin-necked creatures, but Victor knew enough of horses to perceive in them signs of a famous breed of trotters.

"You are a real farmer," he said, as he came up to his host.

Bartol seemed pleased. "I made it pay five per cent. last year," he responded, with pride. "Of course that means counting in my time as a farmer, and not as a lawyer. How did you sleep?"

"Pretty well—when I got at it. I was a little excited and didn't go off as I usually do when I hit the pillow."

"No wonder! I had a restless night myself."

He nodded to the hostler. "That will do," and turned away. "I gave a great deal of thought to your mother's case. The fact seems to be that the human organism is a great deal more complicated than we're permitted ourselves to admit, and the tendency of the ordinary man is to make the habitual commonplace, no matter how profoundly mysterious it may be at the outset. Of course at bottom we know very little of the most familiar phenomenon. Why does fire burn and water run? No one really knows."

They were facing the drive, which curved like a lilac ribbon through the green of the lawn, and the estate to Victor's eyes had all the charm of a park combined with the suggestive music of a farmstead.

"It's beautiful here!" he exclaimed.

"I'm glad you like it, and I hope you and your mother will stay till we have put you both straight with the world."

"If I could only do something to pay my freight, Mr. Bartol. I feel like a beggar and a fool to be so helpless. I was not expecting to be kicked out of college, and I'm pretty well rattled, I'll confess."

"You keep your poise notably," the lawyer replied, with kindly glance. "To be so suddenly introduced to the mystery and the chicanery of the world would bewilder an older and less emotional man."

They breakfasted in a big room filled with the

sunlight. Through the open windows the scent of snowy flowers drifted, and the food and service were of a sort that Victor had never seen. A big grape-fruit, filled with sugar and berries; corn-cakes, crisp and golden; bacon delicately broiled, together with eggs (baked in little earthen cups), and last of all, coffee of such fragrance that it seemed to vie with the odor of the flowers without. Each delicious dish was served deftly, quietly, by a sweet-faced maid, who seemed to feel a filial interest in her master.

The service was a revelation of the perfection to which country life can be brought by one who has both wealth and culture; and Victor wondered that any one could be sad amid such radiant surroundings.

"I can't see why you ever return to the city," he said, with conviction.

Bartol smiled. "That's the perversity of our human nature. If I were forced to live here all the time the farm might pall upon me, just as if all seasons were spring. As it is, I come back to it from the turmoil of the town with never-cloying appetite. Per contra, these maids and my farm-hands find a visit to the city their keenest delight. To them the parks and the artificial ponds are more beautiful than anything in nature." His tone changed. "In truth, I live on and do my work more from force of habit than from zest. So far as I can, I get back to the simple animal existence, where sun

and air and food are the never-failing pleasures. I try to forget that I am a pursuer of criminals. I return to my work in the city, as I say, because it helps to keep my appetite for the rural things. I can't afford to let silence and green trees pall upon me. If I were a little more of a believer," he smiled, "I would say that you and your mother had been sent to me, for of late I have been in a deeper slough of despair than at any time since the death of my wife. I am curious to see how all this is going to affect your mother. She may find it very lonely here."

"Oh, I'm sure she will not."

"Well, now, I must be off. But before I go I will show you the catalogues of my library; and perhaps I can bring home some books which will bear on these occult subjects. I have given orders that no information as to you shall go off the place; and your mother is safe here. You may read, or hoe in the garden, or ride a horse."

"I wish I might go to the city with you."

"My judgment is against it. Stay here for a few days till we see which way the wind is blowing." And with a cheery wave of his hand he drove away, leaving Victor on the porch with the feeling of being marooned on an island—a peaceful and beautiful island, but an island nevertheless.

XI

LOVE'S TRANSLATION

TO tell the truth, Victor dreaded being left alone with his mother in this way. He was fully aware now of the invisible barrier between them. No matter what explanation was finally offered, she could never be the same to him again, for whether it was her subconscious self which had cunningly lured them all to the verge of disaster, or some uncontrollable impulse coming from without, in the light any explanation, she was no longer the sweet, gentle, normal mother he had hitherto thought her to be.

It was not a question of being in possession of strange abilities, it was a question of being obsessed by some diabolical power—of being the prey of malignant demons avid to destroy.

The more deeply he thought upon all that had come to him, the more bewildered he became; and to avoid this tumult, which brought no result, he went out and wandered about the farm. His experience was like visiting a foreign country, for the men were either Swiss or German; and the walls of the farm-yard quite as un-American

in their massiveness and their formal arrangement—a vivid contrast to the flimsy structures of the neighboring village. The servants (that is what they were, servants) treated him with the trained deference of those who for generations have touched their caps to the more fortunate beings of the earth, and these signs of subordination were distinctly soothing to the youth's disturbed condition of mind. Instantly, and without effort, he assumed the air of the young aristocrat they thought him.

He strolled down the road to the village, which was a collection of small frame cottages in neat lawns, surrounding a few general stores and a greasy, fly-specked post-office. Here was the unimaginative, the prosaic, perfectly embodied. Old men, bent and gray, were gossiping from benches and boxes under the awnings. Clerks in their shirt-sleeves were lolling over counters. A few farmers' teams stood at the iron hitching-posts with drowsy, low-hanging heads. Neither doubt nor dismay nor terror had footing here. The majesty of dawn, the mystery of midnight, did not touch these peaceful and phlegmatic souls. The spirit of man was to them less than an abstraction and the tumult of the city a far-off roar as of distant cataracts.

Furthermore, these matter-of-fact folk had abundant curiosity and no reverence, and they all stared at Victor with round, absorbent gaze, as if with candid intent to take full invoice of

his clothing, and to know him again in any disguise. He heard them say, one after the other, as he passed along, "Visitor of Bartol's, I guess." And he could understand that this explanation really explained, for Bartol's "Castle" was the resting-place of many strange birds of passage.

Bartol was, indeed, the constant marvel of Hazel Grove. Why had he bought the place? Why, after it was bought, should he spend so much money on it? And finally, why should he employ "foreigners"? These were a few of the queries which were put and answered and debated in the shade of the furniture store and around the air-tight store of the grocery. His farm was their never-failing wonder tale. The building of a new wall was an excitement, each whitewashing of a picket fence an event. They knew precisely the hour of departure of each blooded ram or bull, and the birth of each colt was discussed as if another son and heir had come to the owner.

Naturally, therefore, all visitors to "Hazeldean" came in for study and comment—especially because it was well known that Bartol stood high in the political councils of the party (was indeed mentioned for senator), and that his guests were likely to be "some punkins" in the world. "This young feller is liable to be the son of one of his millionaire clients," was the comment of the patient sitters. "Husky chap, ain't he?"

Feeling something of this comment, and sensing also the sleepy materialism of the inhabitants, Victor regained much of his own disbelief in the miraculous, and yet just to that degree did the pain in his heart increase, for it made of his mother something so monstrous that the conception threatened all his love and reverence for her. Pity sprang up in place of the filial affection he had once known. He began to make new excuses for her. "It must be that she has become so suggestible that every sitter's mind governs her. In a sense, that removes her responsibility." And so he walked back, with all his pleasure in the farm and village eaten up by his care.

His mother was waiting for him on the porch, and as he came up, asked with shining face:

"Isn't this heavenly, Victor?"

"It is very beautiful," he replied, but with less enthusiasm than she expected.

"To think that yesterday I was threatened with the prison, and now—this! We have much to thank Mr. Bartol for."

"That's just it, mother. What claim have we on this big, busy man? What right have we to sit here?"

The brightness of her face dimmed a little, but she replied bravely: "I have always paid my way, Victor, and I am sure last night's message meant much to Mr. Bartol. I always help people. If I bring back a belief in immortality

do I not make fullest recompense to my host? My gift is precious, and yet I cannot sell it—I can only give it—and so when I am offered bed and board in return for my work I am not ashamed to take it. The kings of the earth are glad to honor those who, like myself, have the power to penetrate the veil."

Never before had she ventured upon so frank a defense of her vocation, and Victor listened with a new conception of her powers. As she continued she took on dignity and quiet force.

"The medium gives more for her wages than any earthly soul; and when you consider that we make the grave a gateway to the light, that our hands part the veil between the seen and the unseen, then you will see that our gifts are not abnormal, but supernormal. God has given us these powers to comfort mankind, to afford a new revelation to the world."

"Why didn't you make me a medium?" he asked, thrusting straight at her heart. "Why did you send me away from it all?"

Her eyes fell, her voice wavered. "Because I was weak—an earthly mother. My selfish love and pride overpowered me. I could not see you made ashamed—and besides my controls advised it for the time."

He took a seat where he could look up into her face. "Mother, tell me this—haven't you noticed that your controls generally advise the things you believe in?"

She was stung by his question. "Yes, my son, generally; but sometimes they drive me into ways I do *not* believe in. Often they are in opposition to my own will."

He was silenced for the moment, and his mind took a new turn. "When did Altair first come?"

"Soon after I met Leo. She came with Leo. She attends Leo."

"Have you seen her?"

"No. I am always in deepest trance when she shows herself. I hear her voice, though."

"Mother," he said, earnestly, "if Mr. Bartol gets us out of this scrape will you go away with me into some new country and give up this business?"

"You don't seem to understand, Victor. I can no more escape from these Voices than I can run away from my own shadow. I don't want to run away. I love the thought of them. I have innumerable sweet friends on the other side. To close the door in their faces would be cruel. It would leave me so lonely that I should never smile again."

"Then they mean more to you than I do!" he exclaimed.

"No, no! I don't mean that!" she passionately protested. "You mean more to me than all the *earthly* things, but these heavenly hosts are very dear—besides, I shall go to them soon and I want to feel sure that I can come back to you when I have put aside the body. I fear

now that our separation was a mistake. In trying to shield you from the transient disgrace of being a medium's son, I have put your soul in danger. I was weak—I own it. I was an earthly mother. I wanted my boy to be respected and rich and happy here in the earth-life. I did not realize the danger I ran of being forever separated from you by the veil of death. Oh, Victor, you must promise me that should I pass out suddenly you will try to keep the spirit-way open between us—will you promise this?"

Strange scene! Strange mother! All about them the orioles were whistling, the robins chirping, and farther away the beasts of the barnyard were bawling their wants in cheerful chorus, but here on this vine-shaded porch a pale, small woman sought a compact with her son which should outlast the grave and defy time and space.

He gave his word. How could he refuse it? But his pledge was half-hearted, his eyes full of wavering. It irked him to think that in a month of bloom and passion, a world of sunny romance, a world of girls and all the sweet delights they conveyed to young men, he should be forced to discuss matter which relates to the charnel-house and the chill shadow of the tomb.

He rose abruptly. "Don't let's talk of this any more. Let's go for a walk. Let's visit the garden."

She was swifter of change than he. She could turn from the air of the "ghost-room" to the glory of the peacock as swiftly as a mirror reflects its beam of light, and she caught a delightful respite from the flowers. She was accustomed to the lavish greenhouses of her wealthy patrons, but here was something that delighted her more than all their hotbeds. Here were all the old-fashioned out-of-door plants and flowers, the perennials of her grandfather, to whom hot-houses were unknown. This Colonial garden was another of Bartol's peculiarities. He had no love for orchids, or any exotic or forced blooms. His fancy led to the glorification of phloxes, to the ripening of lilacs, and to the preservation of old-time varieties of roses—plants with human association breathing of romance and sorrow—hence his plots were filled with hardy New England roots flourishing in the richer soils of the Western prairies.

These colors, scents, and forms moved Victor markedly, for the reason that in La Crescent, as a child, he had been accustomed to visit a gaunt old woman, the path to whose door led through cinnamon roses, balsam, tiger-lilies, sweet-william, bachelor-buttons, pinks, hollyhocks, and the like—a wonderland to him then —a strange and haunting pleasure now as he walked these graveled ways and mingled the memories of the old with the vivid impressions of the new.

Back to the house they came at last to luncheon, and there, sitting in the beautiful dining-room, so cool, so spacious, so singularly tasteful in every detail, they gazed upon each other in a delight which was tinged with pain. Such perfection of appointment, such service, all for them (two beggars), was more than embarrassing; it provoked a sense of guilt. The pretty, low-voiced, soft-soled maid came and went, bringing exquisite food in the daintiest dishes (enough food for six), anticipating every want, like the fairy of the story-books. "Mother," said the youth, "this is a story!"

Mrs. Ollnee was accustomed to the splendor of Mrs. Joyce's house, but she was almost as much moved as Victor. She perceived the difference between the old-world simplicity of this flawless establishment and the lavish, tasteless hospitality of men like Pettus.

Who had planned and organized this wide-walled, low-toned room, this marvelously effective cuisine? How was it possible for such service to go on during the master's absence with apparently the same unerring precision of detail?

These questions remained unanswered, and they rose at last with a sense of having been, for the moment at least, in the seats of those who command the earth wisely.

Hardly were they returned to their hammocks on the porch when a swiftly driven car turned in at the gate.

"It is Louise!" exclaimed Mrs. Ollnee.

"And Leo!" added Victor.

With streaming veils the travelers swept up to the carriage steps covered with dust, yet smiling.

"How are you?" called Mrs. Joyce; and then with true motor spirit, addressed the driver: "What's the time, Denis?"

"Two hours and ten minutes from North Avenue."

"Not so bad, considering the roads."

Leo had sprung out and was throwing off her cloak and veil. "I hope we're not too late for luncheon. Mr. Bartol has the *best* cook, and I'm famished."

Her coming swept Victor back into his other and normal self, and he took charge of her with a mingling of reverence and audacity which charmed her. He went out into the dining-room with her and sat beside her while she ate. "I hope you're going to stay," he said, earnestly.

"Stay! Of course we'll stay. It's hot as July in the city—always is with the wind from the southwest. Isn't it heavenly out here?"

"Heavenly is the word; but who did it? Who organized it?"

"Mrs. Bartol. She had the best taste of any one—and her way with the servants was beyond imitation. They all worship her memory."

"I can't make myself believe I deserve all this," he said. "Your coming puts the frosting on my bun."

It was as if some new and utterly different spirit, or band of them, had come with this glowing girl. She radiated the vitality and the melody of youth. Without being boisterous or silly, she filled the house with laughter. "There's something about Hazeldean that always makes me happy. I don't know why," she said.

"You make all who inhabit this house happy," said Mrs. Ollnee. "I can hear spirit laughter echoing to yours."

"Can you? Is it Margaret?"

"Yes, Margaret and Philip."

Victor did not smile; on the contrary, his face darkened, and Mrs. Joyce changed the tone of the conversation by asking: "Did you see the paper this morning? They say you have skipped to join Pettus." This seemed so funny that they all laughed, till Victor remembered that both these women had lost much money through Pettus.

Mrs. Joyce sobered, too. "The Star is against you, Lucy, and you must keep dark for a time. They are denouncing you as a traitor and all the rest of it. Did Paul, or any one, advise you last night?"

"No, nothing was said. I suppose they are considering the matter also. Those deceiving spirits must be hunted out and driven away."

"I'm going to lie down for a while," Mrs. Joyce announced. "My old waist-line is jolted a bit out o' plumb. Leo, will you stretch out, too?"

"No indeed. What I need is a walk or a game of tennis. I'm cramped from sitting so long."

So it fell out that Victor (penniless youth, hedged about with invisible walls, pikes, and pitfalls) was soon galloping about a tennis court in the glories of a new pair of flannel trousers and a lovely blue-striped outing shirt, trying hard not to win every game from a very good partner, who was pouting with dismay while admiring his skill.

"It isn't right for any one to 'serve' as weird a ball as you do," she protested. "It's like playing with loaded dice. I begin to understand why you were not renowned as a scholar."

"Oh, I wasn't so bad! I stood above medium."

"How could you? It must have taken all your time to learn to play tennis in the diabolical way you do—it's conjury, that's what it is!"

They were in the shade, and the fresh sweet wind, heavy with the scent of growing corn and wheat, swept steadily over the court, relieving it from heat, and Victor clean forgot his worriments. This girlish figure filled his eyes with pictures of unforgetable grace and charm. The swing of her skirts as she leaped for the ball, the free sweep of her arm (she had been well instructed), and the lithe bending of her waist brought the lover's sweet unease. When they came to the net now and again, he studied her fine figure with frank admiration. "You are a corker!" was his boyish word of praise. "I

don't go up against many men who play the game as well as you do. Your 'form' is a whole lot better than mine. I am a bit lucky, I admit. You see, I studied baseball pitching, and I know the action of a whirling sphere. I curve the ball—make it 'break,' as the English say. I can make it do all kinds of 'stunts.'"

"I see you can, and I'll thank you not to try any new ones," she protested. "Can you ride a horse?"

His face fell a bit. "There I am a 'mutt,'" he confessed. "I never was on a horse except the wooden one in the Gym."

"I'm glad I can beat you at something," she said, with exultant cruelty. "I know you can row."

"Shall we try another set?" he asked.

"Not to-day, thank you. My self-respect will not stand another such drubbing. I'm going in for a cold plunge. After that you may read to me on the porch."

"I'll be there with the largest tome in the library," he replied.

Mrs. Joyce stopped him as he was going upstairs to his room. "Victor, don't worry about me. While it looks as though I have lost a good deal of money through Pettus, I am by no means bankrupt. I am just about where I was when I met your mother. She has not enriched me—I mean The Voices have not—neither have they impoverished me. It's just the same

with Leo. She's almost exactly where she was when she came East. It would seem as if they had been playing with us just to show us how unsubstantial earthly possessions are."

There was a certain comfort in this explanation, and yet the fact that her losses had not eaten in upon her original capital did not remove the essential charge of dishonesty which the man Aiken had brought against the ghostly advisers. Florence and Thomas Aiken could not afford to be so lenient. They were disinherited, cheated of their rightful legacy, by the lying spirits.

He was anxious, also, to know just how deeply Leo was involved in the People's Bank; and when she came down to the porch he led her to a distant chair beside a hammock on the eastern side of the house, and there, with a book in his hand, opened his interrogations.

He began quite formally, and with a well-laid-out line of questions, but she was not the kind of witness to permit that. She broke out of his boundaries on the third query, and laughingly refused to discuss her losses. "I am holding no one but myself responsible," she said. "I was greedy—I couldn't let well enough alone, that's all."

"No, that is not all," he insisted. "My mother is charged with advising people to put money into the hands of a swindler—"

"I don't believe that. I think she was honest

in believing that Pettus would enrich us all. She was deceived like the rest of us."

"But what becomes of the infallible Voices?"

She laughed. "They are fallible, that's all. They made a gross blunder in Pettus."

"Mr. Bartol suggests that my mother may have been hypnotized by Pettus and made to work his will, and I think he's right. He thinks the whole thing comes down to illusion—to hypnotic control and telepathy."

She looked thoughtful. "I had a stage of believing that; but it doesn't explain all, it only explains a small part. Does it explain Altair to you?"

His glance fell. "Nothing explains Altair—nor that moaning wind—nor the writing on the slates."

"And the letter—have you forgotten that?"

"Half an hour ago, as we were playing tennis, I *had* forgotten it. I was cut loose from the whole blessed mess—now it all comes back upon me like a cloud."

"Oh, don't look at it that way. That's foolish. I think it's glorious fun, this investigating."

He acknowledged her rebuke, but added, "It would be more fun if the person under the grill were not one's own mother."

"That's true," she admitted; "and yet, I think you can study her without giving offense. I began in a very offensive way—I can see that now—but she met my test, and still meets every

test you bring. The faith she represents isn't going to have its heart plucked out in a hurry, I can tell you that."

"The immediate thing is to defend her against this man Aiken. Mr. Bartol said he would order up a lot of books, and I'm to cram for the trial. If you have any book to suggest, I wish you'd write its title down for me."

"What's the use of going to books? The judges will want the facts, and you'll have to convince them that she is what she claims to be."

"How can we do that? We can't exhibit her in a trance?"

"You might. Perhaps her guides will give her the power." She glowed with anticipatory triumph. "Imagine her confounding the jury! Wouldn't that be dramatic! It would be like the old-time test of fire."

He was radiant, too, for a moment, over the thought. Then his face grew stern. "Nothing like that is going to happen. She would fail, and that would leave us in worse case than before. Our only hope is to convince the jury that she is not responsible for what her Voices say. We've got to show she's auto-hypnotic."

"I hope the trial will come soon."

"So do I, for here I am eating somebody else's food, with no prospect of earning a cent or finding out my place in the world. I don't know just what my mother's idea was in educating me in classical English instead of some

technical course, but I'm perfectly certain that I'm the most helpless mollusk that was ever kicked out of a school."

Real bitterness was in his voice, and she hastened to add a word of comfort. "All you need is a chance to show your powers."

"What powers?"

"Latent powers," she smiled. We are all supposed to have latent powers. I am seeking a career, too."

He forgot himself in a return of his admiration of her. "Oh, you don't have to seek. A girl like you has her career all cut out for her."

She caught his meaning. "That's what I resent. Why should a woman's career mean only marriage?"

"I don't know—I guess because it's the most important thing for her to do."

"To be some man's household drudge or pet?"

"No, to be some man's inspiration."

"Fudge! A woman is never anybody's inspiration—after she's married."

"How cynical you are! What caused it?"

"Observing my married friends."

"Oh, I am relieved! I was afraid it was through some personal experience—"

This seemed funny to them both, and they laughed together. "There's nothing of 'the maiden with reluctant feet' about me," she went on. "I simply refuse to go near the brink. I find men stupid, smelly, and coarse."

"I hate girls in the abstract—they giggle and whisper behind their hands and make mouths; but there is one girl who is different." He tried to be very significant at the moment.

She ignored his clumsy beginning of a compliment. "All the girls who giggle should marry the men who 'crack jokes'—that's my advice."

"'Pears like our serious conversation is straggling out into vituperation."

"Whose fault is it?"

"Please don't force me to say it was not my fault. I'm like Lincoln—I joke to hide my sorrows."

"Don't be irreverent."

Through all this youthful give and take the boy and girl were studying each other minutely, and the phrases that read so baldly came from their lips with so much music, so much of hidden meaning (at least with displayed suggestion), that each was tingling with the revelation of it. The words of youth are slight in content; it is the accompanying tone that carries to the heart.

She recovered first. "Now let's stop this school-boy chatter—"

"You mean school-girl chatter."

"Both. Your mother is in a very serious predicament. We must help her."

He became quite serious. "I wish you would advise me. You know so much more about the whole subject than I do. I'm eager to get to work on the books. I suppose it is too much to expect that they will come up to-day?"

"They might. I'll go and inquire."

"No indeed, let me go. Am I not an inmate here?" He disappeared into the house, leaving her to muse on his face. He began to interest her, this passionate, self-willed, moody youth. She perceived in him the soul of the conqueror. His swift change of temper, his union of sport-loving boy and ambitious man made him as interesting as a play. "He'll make his way," she decided, using the vague terms of prophecy into which a girl falls when regarding the future of a young man. It's all so delightfully mysterious, this path of the youth who makes his way upward to success.

A shout announced his return, and looking up she perceived him bearing down upon her with an armful of books.

"Here they are!" he exulted. "Red ones, blue ones, brown ones—which shall we begin on?"

"Blue—that's my color."

"Agreed! Blue it is." He dumped them all down on the wide, swinging couch and fell to turning them over. "Dark blue or light blue?"

"Dark blue."

He picked up a fat volume. "*Mysterious Psychic Forces*. Know this tome?"

"Oh yes, indeed! It's wonderfully interesting."

"I choose it! This color scheme simplifies things. Now, here's another—*The Dual Personality*. How's that?"

"Um! Well—pretty good."

"*Dual Personality* to the rear. Here's a brown book—*Metaphysical Phenomena*."

"That's a good one, too."

"I'm sorry they didn't bind it in blue—and here's a measly, yellow, paper-bound book in some foreign language—Italian, I guess, author, Morselli."

"Oh, that's a book I want to read. Let me take it?"

"Do you read Italian?"

"After a fashion."

"Then I engage you at once to translate that book to me. What is it all about?"

He abandoned his seat on the couch and drew a chair close to hers. "Begin at the first page and read very slowly all the way through. I wish it were a three volume edition."

She looked at him with side glance. "You're not in the least subtle."

"I intended to have you understand that I enjoy the thought of your reading to me. Did you catch it?"

"I caught it. No one else ever suggested that I was stupid."

"I didn't call you stupid. I think you're haughty and domineering, but you're not stupid."

"Thank you," she answered, demurely.

Eventually they drew together, and she began to read the marvelous story of the crucial experiments which Morselli and his fellows laid upon

Eusapia Palladino. Two hours passed. The robins and thrushes began their evensong, the shadows lengthened on the lawn, and still these young folk remained at their reading—Victor sitting so close to his teacher's side that his cheek almost touched her shoulder. The sunset glory of the material world was forgotten in the tremendous conceptions called up by the author of this far-reaching book.

Sweeter hours of study Victor never had. Seeing the rise and fall of his interpreter's bosom and catching the faint perfume of her hair, he heard but vaguely some of the sentences, and had to have them repeated, what time her eyes were looking straight into his. At such moment she reminded him of the dream-face that had bloomed like a rose in the black night, for she was then very grave. Less ardent of blood than he, she succeeded in giving her whole mind to the great Italian's thesis, and the point of view—so new and so bold—stirred her like a trumpet.

"I like this man," she said. "He is not afraid."

Once or twice Mrs. Joyce looked out at them, but they made such a pretty picture she had not the heart to disturb them.

At seven o'clock she was forced to interrupt: "What *are* you children up to?"

"Improving our minds," answered Leo. "Are we starting back? What time is it?"

Mrs. Joyce smiled. "That question is a great compliment to your company. It's dinner-time."

"Are we starting now?"

"No; we're going to stay all night."

"Fine!" shouted Victor. "I was wondering how I could put in the evening."

"It's time to dress," warned Mrs. Joyce. "This is no happy-go-easy establishment. I never saw such perfection of service as Alexander always has. I can't get it, or if I get it I can't keep it; while here, with the master gone half the time, the wheels go like a chronometer."

"It's all due to Marie. She worshiped Mrs. Bartol, and she venerates Mr. Bartol."

Mrs. Joyce cut her short. "Skurry to your room. We must not be late."

As they were going into the house together, Leo said: "I think we would better not let our elders read this book of Morselli's. It's too disturbing for them—don't you think so?"

"It certainly is a twister. However, mother doesn't read any foreign language, so she's safe."

XII

A MOONLIGHT CALL AND A VISION

UPON rising from the dinner table the young people returned to their books, and at ten o'clock Leo lifted her eyes from her page. "Did some one drive up?"

Victor looked at her dazedly. "I didn't hear anybody. Proceed."

"Mercy! It's ten o'clock. Where are Aunt Louise and your mother? I hear Mr. Bartol's voice!" she exclaimed, rising hastily. "Let's go get the latest news."

The master of the house entered before the young people could shake off the spell of what they had been imagining.

"What a waste of good moonlight!" he exclaimed, with smiling sympathy. "Why aren't you youngsters out on the lawn?"

"It's all your fault," responded Leo. "We've been absorbing one of the books you sent up."

"Have you? It must have been a wonderful romance. I can't conceive of anything but a love-story keeping youth indoors on a night like this."

Victor defended her. "We've been reading of Morselli's wonderful experiments. It's in Italian, and Miss Wood has been translating it for me."

"What luck you have!" exclaimed Mr. Bartol. "I engage her to re-translate it for me at the same rate."

Mrs. Ollnee and Mrs. Joyce came in as he was speaking, and Mrs. Joyce, after disposing herself comfortably, said, "Well, what is your report?"

He confessed that he had been too busy with other matters to give the Aiken accusation much thought. "However, I sent an armful of books out to my assistant attorney." He waved his hand toward Victor.

"You don't mean to read books," protested Mrs. Joyce, energetically, "when you've the very source of all knowledge right here in your own house? Why don't you study your client and convince yourself of her powers?—then you'll know what to do and say."

"I had thought of that," he said, hesitantly. "But—"

"You need not fear," Mrs. Joyce assured him. "It's true Lucy cannot always furnish the phenomena on the instant. In fact, the more eager she is the more reluctant the forces are; but you can at least try, and she is not only willing but eager for the test."

Bartol turned to Mrs. Ollnee. "Are you prepared now—to-night?" he asked.

"Yes, this moment," she answered.

Mrs. Joyce exulted. "The power is on her. I can see that. See how her hand trembles! One finger is signaling. Don't you see it?"

Mr. Bartol rose. "Come with me into my study. Mrs. Joyce may come some other time. I do not want any witnesses to-night," he added, with a smile.

Victor watched his mother go into Bartol's study with something of the feeling he might have had in seeing her enter the den of a lion. She seemed very helpless and very inexperienced in contrast with this great inquisitor, so skilled in cross-examination, so inexorable in logic, so menacing of eye.

Leo, perceiving Victor's anxiety, proposed that they return to the porch, and to this he acceded, though it seemed like a cowardly desertion of his mother. "Poor little mother," he said. "If she stands up against him she's a wonder."

The girl stretched herself out on the swinging couch, and the youth took his seat on a wicker chair close beside her. Mrs. Joyce kept at a decent distance, so that if the young people had anything private to say she might reasonably appear not to have overheard it.

Talk was spasmodic, for neither of them could forget for a moment the duel which was surely going on in that inner room. Indeed, Mrs. Joyce openly spoke of it. "If Lucy is not too anxious,

too eager, she will change Alexander's whole conception of the universe this night."

"Of course you're exaggerating, Aunt Louise; but I certainly expect her to shake him up."

"It only needs one genuine phenomenon to convince him of her sincerity. What a warrior for the cause he would make! She must stay right here in his house till she utterly overwhelms him. He took up her case at first merely because I asked him to do so; but he likes her, and is ready to take it up on her own account if he finds her sincere. But I want him to believe in the philosophy she represents."

Half an hour passed with no sign from within, and Mrs. Joyce began to yawn. "That ride made me sleepy."

"Why don't you go to bed?" suggested Leo.

She professed concern. "And leave Lucy unguarded?"

"Nonsense! Go to bed and sleep. Mr. Ollnee and I will stand guard till the ordeal is ended."

"I believe I'll risk it," decided Mrs. Joyce. "I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"Nor your mouth shut," laughed Leo. "Hasten, or you'll fall asleep on the stair."

Left alone, the young people came nigh to forgetting that the world contained aught but dim stretches of moonlit greensward, dewy trees, and the odor of lilac blooms. In the dusk Victor stood less in fear of the girl, and she, moved by the witchery of the night and the

melody of his voice (into which something new and masterful had come), grew less defiant. "How still it all is?" she breathed, softly. "It is like the Elysian Fields after the city's noise and grime."

"It's more beautiful out there." He motioned toward the lawn. "Let's walk down the drive."

And she complied without hesitation, a laugh in her voice. "But not too far. Remember, we are guardian angels."

As she reached his side he took her arm and tucked it within his own. "You might get lost," he said, in jocular explanation of his action.

"How considerate you are!" she scornfully responded, but her hand remained in his keeping.

There were no problems now. Down through the soft dusk of the summer night they strolled, rapturously listening to the sounds that were hardly more than silences, feeling the touch of each other's garments, experiencing the magic thrill which leaps from maid to man and man to maid in times like these.

"How big you are!" exclaimed the girl. "I didn't realize how much you overtopped me. I am considered tall."

"And so you are—and divinely fair."

"How banal! Couldn't you think of a newer one?"

"It was as much as ever I remembered, that.

I'm not a giant in poetry. I'm a dub at any fine job."

Of this quality was their talk. To those of us who are old and dim-eyed, it seems of no account, perhaps, but to those who can remember similar walks and talks it is of higher worth than the lectures in the Sorbonne. Learning is a very chill abstraction on such a night to such a pair. Would we not all go back again to this sweet land of love and longing—if we could?

Victor did not deliberately plan to draw Leonora closer to his side, and the proud girl did not intend to permit him to do so; but somehow it happened that his arm stole round her waist as they walked the shadowy places of the drive, and their laggard feet were wholly out of rhythm to their leaping pulses.

The proof of Victor's naturally dependable character lay in the fact that he presumed no further. He was content with the occasional touch of her rounded hip to his, the caressing touch of her skirt as it swung about his ankle. To have attempted a kiss would have broken the spell, would have alarmed and repelled her. He honored her, loved her, but he was still in awe of her proud glance and the imperious carriage of her head. He preferred to think she suffered rather than invited the clasp of his arm.

She, on her part, was astonished and a little scared by her own complaisant weakness, and as they came out into the lighter part of the walk

she disengaged herself with a self-derisive remark, and asked, "Do you always take such good care of the arms of your girl friends?"

"Always," he replied, instantly, though his heart was still in the clutch of his new-born passion.

"I shall be on my guard next time. . . . I see Mr. Bartol in the doorway. Don't you think we'd better go in? What time do you suppose it is?"

"The saddest time in the world for me if you are going to leave me."

"Don't be maudlin." She had recovered her self-command, and was disposed to be extra severe. "Sentimental nothings is hardly your strong point."

"What *is* my strong point?"

She was ready with an answer. "Plain downright impudence."

He, too, was recovering speech. "I'm glad I have *one* strong trait. I was afraid there was nothing about me to make a definite impression on a proud beauty like you."

"Please don't try to be literary. Stick to your oars and your baseball raquet."

"Bat," he corrected.

"I meant bat."

"I know you did; but you said raquet."

In this juvenile spat they approached the porch where Mr. Bartol stood waiting for them.

"Young people," he called, in a voice that

somehow voiced a deep emotion, "do you realize that it is midnight?"

Protesting their amazement, they mounted the steps and entered the house; but the moment they looked into their host's face they became serious, perceiving that something very tremendous had taken place in his laboratory.

"What has happened?" asked Leo. "What did she do?"

"I don't know yet," he replied, strangely inconclusive in tone and phrase. "I must think it all over. If I can persuade myself that the marvels which I have witnessed are realities, the universe is an entirely new and vastly different machine for me."

Thrilling to the excitement in his face and in his voice, they passed on. At the top of the stairs Leo faced Victor with eyes big with excitement. "What do you suppose came to him?"

"I haven't an idea. He seemed terribly wrought up, though."

"We must say good-night." She held out her hand, and he took it.

"This has been the finest, most instructive day of my life."

She released her hand with a little decisive, dismissing movement. "How nice of you! Signor Morselli should know of it. Good-night!" And the smile with which she left him was delightfully provoking and mirthful.

Victor would have gone straight to his mother

had he known where to find her, for he was eager to know what had taken place in the deeps of Bartol's study. That she had been able to mystify the great lawyer, he was convinced; and yet, perhaps, this was only temporary. "He will go further. What will he find?"

He was standing before his dresser slowly removing his collar and tie when the door opened and his mother entered. She was abnormally wide awake, and her eyes, violet in their intensity, betrayed so much excitement that he exclaimed: "Why, mother, what's the matter? What kind of a session did you have? What has happened to you?"

"Victor, father tells me that Mr. Bartol will be convinced. He is the greatest mind I have ever met. If I can bring him to a belief in the spirit world it will be the most important victory of my life."

"What did he say to you? What did he think?"

"I don't know; and strange to say, I cannot read his mind. He seems convinced of the phenomena, and yet I can't tell for certain. He was skeptical at the beginning, as nearly every one is."

Hitherto, at every such opening, Victor had rushed in to pluck the heart out of her mystery, but now he restrained himself, for fear of trapping her into some admission, which would make his own testimony more difficult in court. He took a seat on the bed and regarded her with meditative eyes, and she went on.

"The Voices are clamoring round me still. They want to speak to you."

"I don't want to hear them—not to-night," he replied, coldly. "Tell them to wait and talk to me when Mr. Bartol is listening."

She seemed disappointed and a little hurt by his tone. "Altair is here. She wishes most to speak."

Interest awoke in him. "What does she want of me?"

She listened. "She says, '*Trust Mr. Bartol.*'"

He could see nothing, hear nothing, therefore his face lost its light.

"Well, we've got to trust him. He's all the help in sight."

Something, a breath, the light caress of a hand, passed over his hair, and a whisper that was almost tone spoke in his ear, "*Fear nothing, if you will be guided and protected.*"

Sweet as this voice was, it irritated him, for he could not disassociate his mother from it. Indeed, it had something subtly familiar in its utterance, and yet he could not accuse her of deceit. He only roughly said: "Don't do that! I don't like that!"

Silence followed, and then his mother sadly said: "You have hurt her. She will not speak again."

"Let her show herself. How do I know who is speaking to me? Let me see her face again." He added this in a gentler voice, being moved

by a vivid memory of the exquisite picture Altair had made.

After another pause Mrs. Ollnee answered: "She will do so. She says soon. She has gone; but your father wants to speak to you."

Victor rose impatiently. "Tell him to come again some other time. I'm sleepy now."

She turned away saddened by his manner, and with a gentle "good-night" went softly from the room.

Victor regretted his bluntness, but could not free himself from a feeling that his mother's Voices were deceptive or imaginary, and her visit hurt and disgusted him so deeply that the charm of his evening's companionship with Leo was all but lost. "Part of her phenomena are real, but these Voices—" He broke off and went to his bed with a vague feeling of loss weighing him down.

For a half-hour he lay in growing bitterness, and then quite suddenly he thought he detected a thin, blue vapor rising from the rag rug at the side of his bed, and for an instant he was startled. "Is it smoke? Or do I imagine it?" As it rose and sank, expanded and contracted, he studied it closely. It was not smoke, for it did not ascend. It was more like filmy drapery tossed by a wind from a hidden aperture in the floor. Motionless, amazed, and awed, he watched it, till out of it the face of a woman looked, her wistful eyes touched with an accusing sorrow. It was

Altair, and her form became more real from moment to moment, until at last he could detect the swell of her bosom, draped with the folds of a shimmering white robe. As he waited a hand appeared at her side, vaguely outlined, yet alive. He could see the fingers loosely clasped about a rose. She was so beautiful that he lay gazing at her in speechless wonder. "Am I dreaming?" he asked himself. "I *must* be dreaming." And yet he could feel the air from the window.

In the light of her glance he forgot all his other loves and cares. His worship for her returned like swift hunger, and he yearned to touch her, to hear her voice. "She is a dream," he decided, and his hand, lifted to test the vision, fell back upon the coverlet.

As if reading his thought, Altair put out her right arm and touched his wrist with a caress like the stroke of a beam of moonlight, so light and cold it was.

"*Victor*," she seemed to say, and his whisper was almost as light as her own.

"Who are you?"

"*Don't you know me? I am Altair. Do not forget me.*"

"I will not forget you," he answered. "I can't forget you. Why do you look so sad?"

"*It is cold and empty where I dwell. I come to you for happiness and warmth. You had forgotten me. You would not listen to my voice.*" Her reproach moved him almost to tears.

"I could not see you. I was not sure."

"*I do not accuse you. It is natural for you to love. When the day comes you will seek another. One whose flesh is warm. Mine is cold. She is of the day. I am of the night. But do not refuse to speak to me.*"

Her bust had grown fuller, more complete as she spoke, and yet from the waist downward she seemed but a trailing garment of convoluting, phosphorescent gauze. Her left hand still hung at her side, vague, diaphanous, but her right lay upon her breast, as beautiful, as real as firelit ivory, and her face seemed to glow as though with some inward radiance.

Victor could follow the exquisite line of her brow, and her eyes were glorious pools of color, deep and dark with mystery and passion. Slowly she sank as if kneeling, her stately head lowered, bent above him, and he felt the touch of soft lips upon his own—a kiss so warm, so human that it filled his heart with worship. Gently he lifted his hand, seeking to draw her to him, and for an instant he felt her pliant body in the circle of his arms—then she dissolved, vanished—like some condensation of the atmosphere, and he was left alone, aching with longing and despair.

For a long time he waited, hoping she would return. He saw the moonlight fade from the carpet. He heard the night wind amid the maple leaves, and he knew he had not been

dreaming, for that strange Oriental perfume lingered in the air, and on the coverlet where her exquisite hand had rested a white bloom lay, mystic and wonderful. He lifted it, and its breath, sweeter than that of any other flower he had ever held, filled him with instant languor and happy release of care.

His next perception was that of sunlight. It was morning, and the kine and fowls were astir.

He looked for the mysterious flower, but it was gone. He sprang from his bed and searched the room for it. "It did not exist," he sadly concluded. "It has returned to the mysterious world from whence it came."

For a long time afterward he suffered with a sense of loss, while the sunlight deepened in his room and the sounds of the barn-yard brought back to him the realization that he was in effect a fugitive in the house of a stranger. Slowly the normal action of his mind and body resumed its sway, and he dressed, quite sure that something abnormal had brought this vision to him. He wondered if he, too, were getting mediumistic. "Am I to be a son of my mother? Am I to hear voices and see visions?" he asked himself, with a note of alarm. He began to fear the disintegrating effects of these experiences. His personality; his body hitherto so solid, so stable, seemed about to develop disturbing capabilities.

He was profoundly pleased and reassured to find on his dressing-room table a large white rose,

a rose precisely like that which had been laid upon his coverlet by the hand of the dream-woman. It's odor was the same, and its petals were as fresh as if it had just been cut. It reassured him by convincing him that his vision was real—that it had a basis of physical change; but it also started a perplexing chain of thought. "How came the rose here? Who brought it?" was his question. "It certainly was not there when I went to bed."

With the flower in his hand, he still stood looking down at the place where the hand of Altair had rested—still marveling at this mingling of the real and the fantastic, the dream and the rose, when something shining revealed itself half concealed by the pillow; and putting out his hand he took up a little brooch of turquoise set with diamonds, which he recognized instantly as one that Leo had worn at her throat when she said good-night.

Sinking into a chair, he stared now at the jewel, now at the rose, while a thrill of pride, of mastery, of joy stole through him. His blood warmed. His heart quickened its beat. Could it be that Leo had been his visitor? Was it possible that she, burning with hidden love of him, had stolen to his room, and there at his bedside, masking herself as Altair, had bent to his drowsy eyes, and laid upon his lips that fervid kiss? The thought confused him, overpowered him, exalted him.

His was a chivalrous nature, therefore this act, at the moment, seemed neither unmaidenly nor wrong—indeed, it appeared very beautiful in his eyes. It humbled him, made him wonder if he were worth the risk she had run? He was not abnormally self-appreciative, but he had not been left unaware of his appeal to women. His previous love-affairs had been those of the undergraduate, proceeding under the jocular supervision of his watchful fellows. His present case was in wholly different spirit. He was a man now—in fact, his quarrel with Leo from the first had been over her evident determination to treat him as a lad.

The memory of her serene self-possession made her self-surrender of the night all the more amazing to him. "It is cold and empty where I dwell," she had said. This meant that she loved him—longed for him—it could mean nothing else. Her love had begun during their ride on the lagoon, in their delicious drowse on the grass. It had been deepened by their afternoon of sweet companionship at tennis and over their books; then came the walk in the moonlight and her acceptance of his caress in the dusky place in the path—all were preparatory to this final wondrous visit and confession.

And yet her eyes had never been other than those of a friend. Seemingly she had laughed at herself for the momentary weakness of yielding to his arm. Her daylight expression had

always been that of the humorous, self-reliant, rather intellectual girl, who acknowledges no fear of man and no sudden rush of passion, and yet— How reconcile the facts!

He smiled to think how he had been deceived by her imperious air, by her expressed contempt for his interest. "And all the while she was really waiting for me to break through her reserve," he said; and this delicious explanation satisfied him for a few moments, till he went deeper into his memory of what she had said and done.

He was forced to reassure himself again by the jewel and the rose that she had really come to him, so dream-like did the whole ethereal episode now seem. The more he dwelt upon the vision the deeper it moved him. It's growing significance set his blood aflame. In fiction and poesy women often sacrifice their reserve, moved by uncontrollable longing, like the heroine of mad Ophelia's song, because commanded by something stronger than their sweet selves. It was hard to think of Leo as one carried out of herself by love — and yet here lay the jewel of her bosom in his hand! How to meet her puzzled and excited him.

Up to this minute he had admired her and had paid court to her as a young man naturally addresses a handsome girl, but he was not violently in love with her; indeed, she had interested him rather less than a girl in Winona,

daughter of Professor Boyden; but now, as he was about to meet her in the breakfast-room, she possessed more power, more significance, than any woman in the world. He recalled how fine and helpful she had been during the few days of their acquaintance—her serenity, her good sense, her pungent comment began to seem very wonderful.

He looked at himself in the glass, finding there a very good-looking, stalwart youth, but could not discover anything to account for the sudden blaze of Leonora's self-sacrificing passion. He was neither a fool nor a peacock, and he tried to account for her love on the ground of her regard for his mother. Then, like a flash of light, came the thought, "She was sleep-walking!"

He had read of the marvels of hypnotism and somnambulism. Perhaps in some strange way his mother's desire to have Leo love her son had sent the girl straight to his bedside. There was something uncanny in her speech and in her gestures—only in her kiss had she been solidly, warmly human.

And yet all this seemed so difficult to believe—and besides, if the girl came in her sleep, did it not prove her love quite as conclusively? It might be unconscious, but it was there.

With heart pounding mightily, and face set and stern, he left his room and began descending the stairway, uncertain still of the way in which he should meet her.

Happily he found no one in the dining-room but the maid, who said to him, "Mr. Bartol would like to see Mr. Ollnee in his study as soon as Mr. Ollnee has had his breakfast."

"Very well," he replied; "I will make short work of breakfast this morning."

As he sat thus awaiting Leo, his mind filled with the wonder of her self-surrender, he considered carefully in what way he should greet her. "She must not know that I know," he decided. "I will greet her as if I had not found the brooch, and I will leave it where she will happen upon it accidentally."

XIII

VICTOR TESTS HIS THEORY

HE was still at breakfast, deeply engaged with his alluring vision, when Mrs. Joyce and his mother entered the room. As he rose to greet them Mrs. Joyce asked, "Have you seen Mr. Bartol?"

"Not yet—but he is up. I am to see him soon. Where is Leo?"

"She is not feeling very brisk this morning, and is taking her coffee in bed."

He said no more, but resumed his seat, richer by this added proof of the deep perturbation through which the girl had passed. He was disappointed, and eager to see her, but the conviction that she had been sleepless from love of him put him among the clouds. He would have forgotten his appointment with Bartol had not the maid reminded him of it. Even then he tried to avoid it. "You're sure he wanted me? Didn't he mean my mother?"

"I'm quite sure he said Mister Ollnee."

"Mother, what do you suppose he wants of me?"

"I don't know, Victor. Perhaps he wants to talk over the trial."

"Come back and tell us as soon as you can," commanded Mrs. Joyce. "I'm crazy to know what he did last night, and what he really thinks of us?"

Victor promised to report, and went away to his interview with a vague alarm disturbing the blissful self-satisfaction of the early morning.

He found Bartol seated at a big table with a writing-pad before him and four or five open volumes disposed about as if for reference. He, too, looked old and worn and rather grim, but he greeted his guest politely. "Good-morning. Have you seen your mother this morning?"

"Yes, I have just left her at breakfast."

"How is she?"

"She seems quite herself — a little pale, perhaps."

"Be seated, please. I want to go over our case with you. First of all, I want you to tell me once more, and in full detail, all you know of your mother's life. Begin at the beginning and leave nothing out. Don't theorize or try to explain—give me the facts as you have observed them."

This was not the kind of business to which a love-exalted youth would set himself, but Victor squared himself before the brooding face and deep-set eyes of his host, and entered once more upon the story of the "ghost-room," which had

been the one dark spot in his childhood, and which became again in a moment the overshadowing torment of his young manhood.

As he talked the intent look of the man before him, his short, sharp, significant questions inspired him. He poured forth in eloquent and moving phrase the story of his sudden awakening to a knowledge that his mother was a paid medium, and under persecution by the press of the city. He told of his sittings with her, wherein he had savagely determined to unmask her for her own good. He admitted his complete failure. He related his experiences during the time she lay in deathly trance, and his voice lost its smooth flow as he approached the most marvelous experience of all, when the vast and murmuring wind blew through the small room and Altair came with sad, sweet face, to bewitch him and to shake his conceptions of the universe to their foundation stones. He confessed his bewilderment and confusion, and ended by saying: "It's all unnatural, diseased. I can't believe it is the real side of things."

"I wonder that you kept your head at all," remarked Bartol. "Your youth and good, hot blood protect you. Have you talked with your mother about our sitting?"

"Only a few words. She came to my room last night and told me she had only a dim recollection of what took place. She said The Voices wanted to talk to me—but I didn't want

them to talk to me—and said so—and she went away."

Bartol mused. "Belief is not a matter of evidence; it is a habit of mind. I find myself unable to follow the evidence of my own senses. My tests of your mother last night convinced me at the moment that she had the right to claim supernormal powers. She seemingly turned matter into a mere abstraction, and made the learning of physicists the chatter of children." As he spoke his memory of what he had seen freshened and his excitement increased. His voice deepened and his eyes glowed. "Here are my notes of what took place, and I have spent the night in comparing my observations with those of Sir William Crookes concerning the medium Home. In a certain very real sense the phenomena I witnessed were quite as marvelous as those Crookes chronicled." He rose and began to walk up and down the room. "And yet this morning I do not believe—I cannot believe—that writing was precipitated in a closed book held in my hand, that a pen rose of its own volition and tapped upon the table.

"The tendency of any mind, any science, is to harden, to crystallize, to reach a stopping point. The student is prone to think that the knowledge of the physical universe which we have must be the larger part of all that is knowable—and that soon we will have gathered it all into our text-books. Of course this is the

sheerest self-delusion. A little thought will make clear that all we know is as nothing compared to that which remains to be known. Up to ten o'clock last night I was one of those who believe that the domain of nature is pretty thoroughly mapped out, staked, and plowed by the investigator, but this morning I find my horizons again extended. It would be foolish to say that an hour's experiments and a night of reading along new lines had overturned all the landmarks of biologic science; but I confess that the world for me has greatly changed. I held in my hand last night a force *in action* for which science has no name and no place—and yet thirty years ago Sir William Crookes wrote of this same force in the spirit with which he discussed other elements and powers, and yet his testimony is not accepted by his fellows even to-day.

"Your mother met every test cheerfully and instantly,and demonstrated to me, as Home did to Crookes, as Slade did to Zöllner, that matter, as we think we know it, does not exist. She convinced me not merely of her honesty, but of her high powers as a psychic. A calm, persistent, logical purpose ran through all her manifestations, and her Voices—whatever they may mean to you—advised me to sit again with her and to have you and Miss Wood, Mrs. Joyce, and Marie always in the circle. This I intend to do. I feel at this moment as if no other business mattered. I have been here at my desk since mid-

night, reading, comparing notes, trying to convince myself that I have not gone suddenly mad.

"If I was not utterly deceived, if your fresh, keen young eyes are of any use whatsoever, if the words of Crookes, Wallace, Lombroso, and their like are of any weight, then we have in your mother a rare and subtle organism whose powers are of more importance than the rings of Saturn or the canals of Mars."

Victor was awed, carried out of himself and his small concerns by the deep voice of the great lawyer as he formulated his impassioned yet restrained musings. It was evident that he welcomed this opportunity of putting his thoughts into words, of ordering his words into argument. Half in reverie and half in conscious statement to the entranced youth, he poured forth his troubled soul.

"I was a materialist when your mother entered my house. I believed that the man who died went out like a candle. The grave was the end. To me the so-called revelations of Buddha, Gautama, Christ, were the vague dreams of the heart-sick, the stricken mourners of the earth—not one of them brought a beam of hope—but in this modern spirit of experimentation, in the work of Crookes and his like, I see a ray of light. Your mother's impersonations of my wife, her messages—Voices—may be due to mind-reading, to clairvoyance, but *the method of their delivery* certainly lies beyond any known law. In that

glows my hope. Grant the possibility of direct writing, of the power of the mind to *think* its will upon paper without the aid of hand or pen, and a whole new world is opened up, the horizons of life are infinitely extended."

He paused abruptly. "I was weary of my days. Yesterday I moved as a creature of habit. This morning it seems that I have a new interest. I am convinced that in defending your mother I am defending something precious to the human race; but I must be very sure of my ground. I must scrutinize every phase of her power, and you must help me. You are young and well-trained. You have a good mind, and I am persuaded you will go far. Your mother worships you, lives for you. Now, you and I together must make such study of her mediumship as America has never seen—a study which shall have nothing to do with any ism, fad, or prejudice. Will you help me?"

Victor, overwhelmed by the confidence of the great lawyer, by the honor which this plea laid upon his young shoulders, could only stammer, "I will do my best."

Bartol thanked him. "I see now, as I never did before, that this power is a subtle, personal, psychical adjustment, and the part you are to play is a double one. First, you are her son, and your presence and influence are indispensable. Secondly, you are vigorous and alert, comparatively free from the wrecking effect of

bereavement such as mine. I confess I cannot trust myself in the face of the supposed appeal of my dead. I am like the doctor who refuses to practise upon his own child—my desires blind me. At the same time I see that we cannot thrust strangers upon your mother, especially in her present excited state. What I propose is a series of private experiments, including chemical tests, instantaneous photographs, and the like, which shall convince both judge and jury of the reality of these phenomena. This case will come before my friend, Judge Matthews, and we have in him a just and penetrating mind. If I can make him feel my own present conviction we may rest our case safely with any unprejudiced jury."

He paused and picked up a volume from the table. "Crookes is explicit. He says he *saw* the lath move without visible cause, he *saw* Home thrust his hand into the hearth and stir the coals, he *saw* the accordion play without any reason; and in all this he is sustained by other men testing each phenomenon by means of electrical registering devices. Now we must duplicate these. We must go into court armed with photographs, records, and witnesses. We will make this a *cause célèbre*—doing our small part to forward this superb and fearless European movement. I intend to be both lawyer and physicist hereafter," he ended, with a smile.

That the great lawyer was now completely

engaged upon his mother's defense Victor exultantly perceived, and it gave him a feeling of pride and security, but this was followed by a sense of being uprooted. The sight of this man, inspired yet confounded by what had come to him in a single sitting, brought new and disturbing force to all that had happened to himself. Was it possible that thought could be precipitated like dew upon a sheet of paper?

"Now," resumed Bartol, "I have made a further discovery. There is a brotherhood of what we may call true experimentalists—beginning with Marc, Thury, and the Count de Gasparin, and running to Flammarion and Richet, in Paris; the Dialectical Society, Sir William Crookes, Alfred Russell Wallace, Sir Oliver Lodge, in England; thence back to the Continent, to Zöllner, Aksakof, Ochorowicz, De Rochas, Maxwell, Morselli, and Lombroso. I need a condensed record of these experiments, and a synopsis of each theory. Once within this group, you will learn by cross-reference the names of all those whom each of these experimentalists regard as reliable. You can work here or take the books to your room—perhaps, on the whole, Morselli's record is first in importance. Bring me a clear and full abstract of that as soon as you can."

"I do not read Italian," confessed Victor; "but Leo—Miss Wood—does; perhaps she will help me."

"Very good. Now as to the mechanical side of this matter. I have a nephew who is an expert photographer and a clever electrician. With your permission, I will send for him and see what he can do. He is a man of high standing in his profession, and a quiet personality—one that will not irritate or alarm your mother. Shall I bring him in and give her over to all?"

"Certainly. I'm sure mother wants you to have full charge."

"Very well. We will set to work at once, for our case may come up this week. At its lowest terms, the Aiken charge involves—to us—the admission that our client is highly suggestible and that she has been used as an unconscious stool-pigeon by Pettus. For the present we must proceed upon this basis. Suggestion is more or less accepted at the present time, and we may be able to get the jury to admit our plea; but I will not conceal from you the fact that your mother stands in danger of severe punishment. The *Star* has singled her out as a scapegoat, and is behind the Aikens. They will push her hard. I do not think they will follow her here, but if they do I shall send you to my nephew's home.—Now to Morselli. We must know just where he stands on this amazing branch of biology. Will you make this synopsis to-day?"

Victor's eyes glowed with the fire of his awakened pride and resolution. "If you'll let

me help you, Mr. Bartol, I'll show you what my training has been. I'm quick in some things. I will collate and put in order all the latest deductions of science—" He stopped. "But what exactly do you intend to do with my mother?"

"I mean to confine her in such wise as to demonstrate precisely what she can do and what she cannot. I must divide what is conscious from that which is unconscious. I must understand precisely how she produces these messages, Voices, and faces. We are agreed that she is not *consciously* deceptive?" He questioned Victor with a glance.

"I *know* she is honest."

"Very well, we must demonstrate her honesty. We must photograph her so-called materializations side by side with her own body, and we must register the work of these invisible hands, and in every possible way demonstrate that she *is* the medium and not the originating cause of these messages. In no other way can we save her from disgrace and a prison cell."

The youth went away with a humming sound in his head. The thought of his gentle little mother herded with vile women within the gray walls of a penitentiary filled him with such horror that his face went drawn and white. "It shall not be! I will not have it so!" he said, and yet he saw no other way in which to prevent it. All depended upon the man whose impassioned words still rang in his ears, and his

admiration for the lawyer rose to that love which youth yields to the highest manhood.

Mrs. Joyce met him in the hall, excited, eager. "What did he say?"

Victor passed his hand over his face in bewilderment. "I must think," he protested. "He said so much— Where is mother?"

"She is on the porch—waiting. Let us go out to her."

He followed her with troubled face, but the bright sunshine and the songs of the birds miraculously restored him. He looked up and down the piazza hoping to see Leo, but she was not in sight. He took a seat in silence, and Mrs. Joyce saw his mother grow pale in sympathy as she read the trouble in his face.

Mrs. Joyce urged him to tell what had passed between them, and he replied:

"I can't do it. All I can say is this: he believes mother is honest, and that she has some strange power. He will defend her in court; but he intends to study into the whole business very closely, and he wants us to help him."

"Of course we'll help him," responded Mrs. Joyce, readily.

Mrs. Ollnee went to the heart of the problem. "Just what does he want to do, Victor?"

"It is necessary to prove absolutely that you have nothing to do with these phenomena."

"But I do have everything to do with them," she replied; "that's what being a medium means.

However, I know what he needs better than you do. He wants to prove that the messages are supra-normal. Very well, I am ready for any test."

"It will be a fierce one, mother. He intends to use electricity and machines for recording movements and instantaneous photography."

"I am willing, provided he will proceed in co-operation with your father and Watts."

"He will never do that," declared Victor. "He will not begin by granting the very thing he's trying to prove."

It was upon this most solemn conference that Leo descended, pale and restrained, and though Victor sprang up with new-born love in his face, she did not flush with responding warmth. Her mood of the moonlit walk had utterly vanished, and he found himself checked, chilled, and thrust down from his high place of exaltation.

It was as if she (ashamed of her own weakness) had resolved to punish him for presumption. He smarted under her indifference, but made no open protest, though his hand (in the pocket of his coat) rested upon the jeweled sign of her self-surrender.

She lost a little of her indifference when she learned that Bartol had been kept awake all night by the significance of the phenomena he had witnessed, and she joined heartily in declaring that he must be met in every demand.

"Oh, I wish I might see the experiments," she exclaimed.

"He wishes you to do so," replied Victor, eagerly. "The Voices told him to have you in the circle, you and Mrs. Joyce—"

"And Marie," added Mrs. Ollnee. "Marie is psychic."

"When do we try?" asked Leo, meeting his eyes a little unsteadily, so it seemed to him.

Again Mrs. Ollnee answered for him. "To-night; Mr. Bartol is telephoning now, arranging for it."

"How do you know?" asked Victor.

"Your father is speaking to me."

"I hear him!" exclaimed Mrs. Joyce, listening intently.

"What does he say?" asked Leo.

Mrs. Ollnee again replied. "He says: '*Be brave—trust us. We will protect you.*'"

Looking across at the girl, in whose cheeks the roses were beginning to bloom again, the youth resented the interposition of the supernatural. He was eager to approach her, to hint at the memory of her secret, sweet embrace. As he studied the exquisite curve of her lips their touch burned again upon his flesh, and he rose with sudden reassertion of himself. "Come, Leo, let's return to Morselli."

He had never called her by her first name before, and it produced a shock in them both. She looked her reproof, but he pretended not to

see it, and neither Mrs. Joyce nor Mrs. Ollnee seemed to think his familiarity worthy of remark.

Leo coldly answered: "I can only give a little time. We must go home to-day."

Mrs. Joyce promptly said, "We can't desert the ship now, Leo."

"But we have nothing to wear!" the girl retorted.

"We'll send down and have some things brought up. Really, this work for Mr. Bartol is more important than clothes."

"I suppose it is," Leo admitted. "But at the same time one should have a decent regard to the conventions."

The colloquy which followed filled Victor with dismay. It appeared that Leo was really eager to get away, as if she felt herself to be in a false position. "I can't afford to drop my daily affairs in the city. Why can't these experiments be put off for a day or two."

"I don't think we ought to ask a great and busy lawyer to accommodate himself to our piffling social plans," replied Mrs. Joyce. "A few minutes ago you were wild to join these experiments, now you are crazy to go home."

Victor, who imagined himself in full possession of the reason for her pause, said nothing; but his eyes spoke, and the girl was restless under his glance.

She gave in at last. "Well, if you will send for the things I need—"

Victor had come from Bartol's study mightily resolved to do speedily and well any work that might fall to his hand, but as he found himself seated close beside the daylight girl and listening to her voice transposing Morselli into English his resolution weakened. What were ghosts, inventions, theories, compared to the satin-smooth curve of the maiden's cheek or the delicate flutter of her lashes?

Try as he would, his attention wandered. The book smelled of the clinic, the girl of the dawn. Morselli's problem was all of the night, while on every side the young lover beheld trees flashing green mirrors to the sun, and flowers riding like dainty boats on the billows of a soft western wind. Moreover, the girl's voice was like to the purling of brooks.

Twice she reproved him for his wandering wits and laggard pen, and the second time he said: "I can't help it. The time and place invite to other occupations. Let's go for a walk."

"A brave student, you are!" she mocked. "Mr. Bartol will find you a valuable aid in his scientific investigations!"

Her look, her flushed cheek, and the hint of her bosom set him a-tremble. The memory of his midnight visitor returned, filling him with springtime madness..

"Don't you make game of me," he stammered, warningly. "If you do—I'll—"

She raised an amused glance. "What? What will you do, boy?"

"Boy!" Her pose, her smile were challenges that struck home. With swift, outflung arm, he encircled her waist and drew her to his breast. "Boy, am I?"

She beat upon him, pushed him with her small hands. "Let me go, brute!"

He laughed at her, exulting in his strength. "Oh, I am a brute now, am I? Well, I'm not. I'm a man and your master. I want a kiss."

She ceased to struggle, but into her face and voice came something which paralyzed his arms. Repentant and ashamed, he released her and stood before her humbly, while she denounced him for "a rowdy with the manners of a burglar." "This ends our acquaintance," she added, and she spurned the book on the floor as if it were his worthless self.

He was scared now, and boyishly pleaded, "Don't go—don't be angry; I was only joking."

She knew better than this. She had seen elemental fire flaming from his eyes, and dared not remain. With proud lift of head she walked away, leaving him penitent, bewildered, crushed.

XIV

THE ORDEAL

IN truth, Victor had not kept his head—how could he when each day brought some new temptation, some unexpected danger, or an unforeseen barrier? Was ever such a week of trial and perplexity thrust upon a youth? And the worst of it lay in the fact that there were no signs of a release from these baffling foes. Love's distress now came to add to his bewilderment and alarm.

Leo did not appear at luncheon, and her absence gave him great uneasiness till Mrs. Joyce explained that she had only gone to town to fetch some needed clothing. He still carried the little breast-pin in his pocket, but it no longer seemed the gage of a lovely girl's affection. He began to admit that he might be mistaken, and that his dream-woman and the jewel had no necessary connection. "One of the servants may have dropped it there," he now admitted; "and yet how could that be? It was under my pillow when I woke, and I am sure it was not there when I went to sleep. Perhaps I am the one

who walks in sleep. Can it be possible that I took it from her room?"

It was all very puzzling, but he no longer possessed the fatuous self-conceit necessary to charge Leo with such self-abandonment as the dream and the discovery of the brooch had at first seemed to indicate. He sat among his elders at table, silent and depressed, very far from the triumphant mood of the morning, and yet the stream of his admiration set toward the absent one with ever stronger current. The most important thing in all the world, at the moment, was the winning of her forgiving smile.

Bartol was equally distraught, and though he remained politely attentive to his guests, he was plainly absorbed by some inner problem, and left to Mrs. Joyce the burden of the conversation.

Mrs. Ollnee, listless and remote, glanced at her host occasionally in the manner of one who awaits an expected sign. To her son this attitude on her part was repellant, for he understood it to mean that she was neither mother nor guest, but an instrument. He wondered whether Bartol had not, by some overmastering power of the mind, already assumed control of her thoughts as well as of her actions; and he chafed under the pressure of his host's abstraction. "Oh, why can't she quit this business? She must stop it!" he furiously declared.

Altogether they made a serious and restrained company, and all felt the loss of Leo. As the

meal progressed Mrs. Joyce tried to secure from Bartol some notion of what his plans were, and he gravely replied:

"None of you must know. No one shall enter my 'ghost-room' till I am ready for my tests. In fact, I think I shall send you all out for a drive this afternoon so that you may not even *hear* the tap of a hammer."

Victor protested that he ought to study, and to this Bartol replied: "Very well. Take a book with you, but go off the farm. I want to be able to say that not one of the persons most interested were on the place while my preparations were going on."

In truth, the man of law was not merely puzzled by the method of transmitting the messages; he had been profoundly affected by the words themselves. His wife and daughter had apparently spoken to him again, each in distinctive way, upon matters which no one but himself could recognize.

But it was not alone what he had himself seen and heard and felt. The reading to which he had set himself had opened a new world of science for him. He was amazed at the enormous amount of direct evidence gathered and presented by careful men. Chemists applying the methods of the retort, biologists working in their own laboratories, psychologists and medical experts experimenting as upon a clinical subject, presented the same or similar facts. In

Austria, in Russia, in England, the results were identical. To his mind, accustomed to sift and relate evidence, the most convincing thing of all was the substantial agreement of each and all of these investigators. In a certain sense the sneer of the faithful was deserved. These men of X-ray penetration and electrical annunciators had succeeded only in paralleling the phenomena of the early days of the healer and the magician.

At its lowest terms—or, as some would say, at its highest terms—Mrs. Ollnee's power was related to a sort of transcendental physics. Her magic refilled the most ordinary block of wood or crumb of granite with all its ancient potency. It widened and deepened the physical universe illimitably. It discovered the human organism to be unspeakably subtle and complicate, and made of the soul a visible demonstrable entity. Unthinkably swift as are the vibrations of the radium ray, this substance called the brain is capable of receiving, recording, giving off still more intricate and marvelous motions. Of what avail to call it "material"?

At times he glimpsed (as through a narrow opening) unknown regions of space, not of three or four dimensions, but an infinite number of worlds within worlds interpenetrating, undying, yet forever changing. At such moments he perceived that the scientists of to-day were but children groping among the set scenery of a dark stage, their text-books like their Bibles, the

records of the bewildered and stumbling myriads of the past.

"How absurd," he said, "to attempt to make the present conform with the past! The Hebrew scriptures, the Vedas, the Sagas of the North, are all useful as records of the aspirations of primitive men, but the real understanding of the universe is to be obtained now or in the future. The present contains all that the past has possessed and more. Men are less of the beast and more of the spirit. Their powers have intensified, grown psychic, compelling, revealing, and yet the mystery of the universe remains and must remain."

In such ways and others his mind ran as he read swiftly through the wondrous record of experiments made in Rome, in Naples, in Milan. He liked these Italians better than the greatest of the Englishmen for the reason that they uttered no apology to the Pope. They proceeded on the assumption that they were biologists, not priests. They had no care whether their discoveries harmonized with some man's Bible, or whether they did not. The question was simple: Could the human organism put forth from itself a supernumerary hand or arm? Could it project an etheric double of itself? Could it interpenetrate matter?

Along these lines he proposed (with Victor's aid) to study his psychic guest. He had lost sight of the fact that he was to be her defender

in court—or if he remembered it, it was only as a secondary consideration. He had no faintest hope of directly proving the continued existence of his wife and children; but he could see that a demonstration of the power of the living body to project and maintain at a distance an etheric brain, a voice, made (by inference) a belief in immortality possible.

This belief, this possible life of the soul, had nothing to do with the systems of celestial cosmogony built up by the followers of Christ or Gautama, its world was not peopled with angels, gods, or devils; it was merely another and interfusing material region wherein the spirit of man could move, retaining at least a dim memory of the grosser material plane from which it fled. It was inconceivable, of course, when scrutinized directly; but he caught a glint of its wonders now and then, as if from the corner of his half-closed eye.

These physical marvels were kept very near to him, as he sat at his desk, by minute tappings on his penholder, on his chair-back, and by fairy chimes rung on the cut-glass decanter at his elbow. At times he felt the light touch of hands, and once, as he returned to his seat after a visit to the library, he found a sheet of strange parchment thrust under his book, and on this was written in exquisite old-fashioned script: "*Thou hast thy comfort and thy instrument. Hold not thy hand.*" And it was signed "Aurelius."

This was all very startling; but he referred it to Mrs. Ollnee herself. To imagine it a direct message from the dead was beyond him.

At four o'clock the road-wagon brought from the station a small, alert, and business-like young fellow, accompanied by various boxes, parcels, and bags. Bartol met him at the door and took him at once to his study. Neither of them was seen again till dinner-time.

The servants were profoundly excited by all this, but were too well trained to betray their curiosity above stairs. They knew now who Mrs. Ollnee was, but they believed in their master's government and listened to the hammering in the study with impassive faces—while at their duties in the hall or dining-room—but permitted themselves endless conjecture in their own quarters. Marie alone took no part in these discussions, though she seemed more excited than any of the others.

Meanwhile, Victor watched and waited in a fever of anxiety for Leo's return. At five o'clock she came, but went directly to her room.

Marie met her tense with excitement. "Oh, Miss Leo, Master has asked me to sit in the circle to-night, and I'm scared."

"You mean Mr. Bartol has asked you?"

"Yes—Miss."

"Well, you should feel exalted, Marie. It will be a wonderful experience."

"I suppose so, Miss, but my hands are all cold and my stomach sick with thinking of it."

Leo laughed. "You're psychic, that's what's the matter with you."

"Oh, do you think so!"

"Let me take your hands." Marie gave them. Leo smiled. "Cold and wet! Yes, you are *it!* But don't let it interfere with dinner. I'm hungry as a bear. Cheer up. I'd give anything to be a psychic."

"I shall flunk it, Miss; I can't go through it, really."

"Nonsense! It will be good as a play."

Half an hour later the others came in, and Leo heard Victor's voice in the hall with a feeling of distaste. She had gone out to him during that moonlit walk, and was suffering now a natural revulsion. It had not been love; it had been (she admitted) only physical attraction, and the fault, the weakness, had been hers. His presuming upon her moment of compliance was of the nature of man. It had frightened her to discover such deeps within herself. "We are all animals at bottom," she charged, in the unnatural cynicism of youth.

Notwithstanding this mood, she clothed herself handsomely in a gown which lent beauty to the exceedingly dignified rôle she designed to play, and so costumed went to her aunt's room to hear the news.

Mrs. Joyce was lying down, and her voice

sounded tired as she said: "We were ordered out of the house at three, and have been driving ever since. Alexander, so Marie says, has had strange men working all the afternoon on some contrivance in his study. Evidently he is going to be very scientific."

Leo exclaimed with delight. "Now we'll see if these faces and forms are real or not."

"Why, Leo! Do you doubt?"

"Yes, deep in my heart I do. I cannot quite free myself from the belief that in some way Lucy produces all these effects."

"Of course she transmits them. She's a medium."

"I don't mean it that way—and I don't mean that she cheats; but somehow I never feel as if anything real came to me direct."

Mrs. Joyce did not feel able to pursue this line of argument. "What's the matter between you and Victor?"

"Who told you anything was the matter?"

"I sensed it."

"Well, why didn't you sense the cause?"

"He's a nice boy; you mustn't ill-treat him, Leo."

"Your solicitude is misplaced; you should be concerned about me."

"You? Trust you to take care of yourself! I never knew a more self-sufficient young person. I am only waiting for some man to teach you your place."

This was a frequent subject of very plain though jocular allusion between them. "A man may—some time—but not a rowdy boy. "How does Lucy take the promise of a test?"

"Very calmly. She is relying wholly on her 'band' to protect her. She feels the importance of the trial, and does not shrink from it."

The Miss Wood whom Victor met as he entered the dining-room that night was precisely the young lady he had first seen, a calm, smiling, superior person who looked down upon him with good-humored tolerance of his youth and sex, putting him into the position of the bad little boy who has promised not to do so again. She not merely loftily forgave him, she had apparently minimized the offense, and this hurt worst of all. "I'm sorry not to have been able to work to-day," she said; "but I really had to go to town."

This lofty, elderly sister air after her compliance to his arm eventually angered him. His awe, his gratitude of the morning were turned into the man's desire to be master. He set his jaws in sullen slant and bided his time. "You can't treat me in this way when we're alone," he said, beneath h s breath.

Later he was hurt by her vivid interest in the young inventor, whom Bartol introduced as Stinchfield. He was a small man with a round, red face and laughing blue eyes, but he spoke with authority. His knowledge was amazing

for its wide grasp, but especially for its precision. He guessed at nothing; he knew—or if he did not know he said so frankly. In the few short years of his professional career he had been associated with some of the greatest masters of matter. His acquaintances were all men of exact information and trained judgment, men who lived amid physical miracles and wrought epics in steel and stone.

Naturally he absorbed the attention of the table, for in answer to questions he touched upon his career, and his talk was absorbing. He had been a year at Panama. He had helped to survey the route for a vast Colorado irrigating tunnel, and in his spare moments had perfected a number of important inventions in automobile construction.

It was for all these reasons that Bartol had 'phoned him, urging him to come out and assist in the infinitely more important work of reducing to law the phenomena which sprang, apparently without rule or reason, from the trances of his latest and most interesting client. "Here is your chance to get a grip on the phenomena that have puzzled the world for centuries," he said.

When Mrs. Joyce asked Stinchfield if he knew anything about spirit phenomena, he replied, candidly:

"Not a thing, directly, Mrs. Joyce. Of course I have read a good deal, but I have never ex-

perimented. It is not easy to secure co-operation on the part of those gifted with these powers. The trouble seems to be they consider themselves in a sense priests, keepers of a faith, whereas I have the natural tendency to think of them in terms of physics."

Bartol, smiling, raised a hand. "I don't want the company drawn into controversy. Experts agree that argument defeats a psychic."

Mrs. Ollnee still wore the look of one who but half listens to what is said, and Mrs. Joyce slyly touched her hand with the tips of her fingers. "Do you want to go to your room?" she asked.

Mrs. Ollnee shook her head. "No, I am all right."

"We will have better results if we 'cut out' desert," Mrs. Joyce explained to Bartol. "Overeating has spoiled many a séance."

"Is it as physical as that?" exclaimed Stinchfield.

"I never eat when I am on a hard case," said Bartol.

Victor began to awaken to the crucial nature of the test which was about to be made of his mother's powers. This laughing young physicist was precisely the sort of man to put the screws severely on. It was all a problem in mechanics for him. Whether the psychic suffered or rejoiced in the operation did not concern him. "If she is deceiving us in any way he will discover

it," the son forecasted, with a feeling of fear at his heart. "And yet how can I defend her?"

Bartol said to Mrs. Ollnee: "Would you mind dressing for the performance? I'd like you to go with Mrs. Joyce and Marie, and clothe yourself in all black if possible, so that I can say you came into my study not merely searched, but re-clothed."

She said, quite simply: "I have no objection at all. I am in your hands."

After the older women left the room Victor drew near to Leo with a low word. "Poor little mother! she is in the hands of the inquisition to-night."

Thrilling to the excitement of the hour, she forgot her resentful superior pose. "Isn't that little man magnificent? Why didn't you go in for civil engineering or chemistry?"

"Because no one had sense enough to advise me," he bitterly answered.

"Think where that funny little body has carried that head," she continued, still studying Stinchfield. "If he had only been given shoulders like yours—"

"I'm glad you like something about me."

"I was speaking of your body as a machine for carrying a brain around over the earth."

"You seem to think of me as having no brain."

"Oh, not quite so bad as that. You have a brain, but it's undeveloped."

"I'm growing up rapidly these days. Seems like I'd lived a year since our walk last night."

She colored a little. "Forget that and I'll forgive you."

"I can't forget that."

"Have you any idea what the tests are to be?" she asked, in an effort to change the subject.

"No, I'm outside of it all. I hope they won't scare my poor little mother out of her senses. Ought I to step in and stop it?"

"No, not unless The Voices say so. They welcome investigation—so they've always said. What I should insist on, if I were you, is plenty of time and a series of sittings."

She was speaking now in gracious mood, and he, eager to win from her a fuller expression of forgiveness, spoke again, bravely. "I hope you are not going to be angry with me?"

"Not at all," she replied, with disheartening, impersonal cordiality. "I was partly to blame. I forgot you were a hot-headed boy."

"Don't take that tone with me—I won't stand it!"

"How can you help it?" she answered, with a smile, and moved toward the end of the table where Bartol and Stinchfield still sat smoking and leisurely sipping their coffee.

The little engineer sprang up as she drew near, and stood like a soldier at attention as she said, "Are you in merciless mood to-night, Mr. Stinchfield?"

"Far from it," he responded. "I'm in a receptive mood. The fact that Mr. Bartol has found enough in this subject to wish to investigate predisposes me to open-mindedness."

"Suppose we go into the library," suggested Bartol, and they all followed him across the hall.

Leo walked with the engineer, leaving Victor in the rear, hurt and suffering sorely.

It was not so much her displayed interest in Stinchfield as her haughty disregard of himself that touched his self-esteem. Thereafter he sulked like the boy she declared him to be.

When his mother came in robed in black and looking the sad young widow he was on the verge of rebellion against the whole plan of action, but he kept silence while Bartol explained his design.

"It is customary for 'mediums' to have things their own way, but in this case Mrs. Ollnee has placed herself entirely in my hands. The tests will be made in my study. He turned the key and unlocked the door. "Mr. Stinchfield will enter first and see that the room is as we left it."

The engineer entered, and after a moment's survey called: "All is untouched. Come in."

Bartol led the way with Mrs. Ollnee, and when Victor, the last to enter, had paced slowly over the threshold Stinchfield locked the door and handed the key to his host. The inquisition was begun.

The most notable furnishing of the room was

a battery of three cameras, so arranged that they could be operated instantaneously, and Mrs. Joyce asked, anxiously, "Has the band consented to this?"

"They have consented to a trial," answered Mrs. Ollnee, in a faint voice. She had grown very pale, and her hands were trembling. To Victor this seemed like the tremor of terror, and his heart was aching with pity.

On one side of the room a deep alcove lined with books had been turned into a dark-room by means of curtains, and before these draperies stood the inevitable wooden table, but beside it, inclosing a chair, was a conical cage of wire netting encircled by bands of copper.

Mrs. Joyce exclaimed, "You do not intend to cage her in that?"

"That is my intention," calmly replied Bartol.

"Have the controls consented?" asked Mrs. Joyce.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Ollnee.

Of the further intricacies of Stinchfield's preparation Victor had no hint, so artfully were they concealed; but he recognized in it all a kind of humorous skepticism (which the engineer radiated in spite of his manifest wish to appear respectful); and as his mother entered her little torture tent Victor said, "You needn't do this if you don't want to, mother."

"Your father commands it," she replied, submissively.

Stinchfield screwed the cage to the floor and made an attachment to a small wire which ran along the book-case to a dark corner. Victor was enough of the physicist to infer that his mother was now surrounded by an electric current.

Bartol explained: "We are to start in total darkness, and then we intend to try various degrees and colors of lights. Mrs. Ollnee, how will you have us sit?"

"I want Victor opposite me, with Leo at his right and Louise at his left. Mr. Stinchfield will then be able to operate his wires. You, Mr. Bartol, sit at Leo's right and nearest the cage." Her voice was now quite firm, and her manner decided. "All sit at the table for a time."

Stinchfield snapped out the lights, one by one, till only two, one red, the other green, struggled against the darkness. When these went out the room was perfectly black.

Bartol then said: "In the cabinet behind the medium is a self-registering column of mercury, a typewriter, and a switch, which will light a lamp which hangs in the ceiling above the cabinet, and which has no other connection. The psychic is inclosed in a mesh of steel wire too fine to permit the putting forth of a finger. If the lamp is lighted, the column of mercury lifted, or the typewriter keys depressed, it will be by some supra-normal power of the medium.

There is also on a table just inside the curtains, with paper and pencils, a small tin trumpet, a bell, and a zither upon it. If possible, we wish to obtain a written message independent of Mrs. Ollnee."

"It is the unexpected that happens," remarked Mrs. Joyce. "Shall we clasp hands, Lucy?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Ollnee.

Victor, reaching for Leo's hand, tingled with something not scientific, a current of something subtler than electricity which came from her palm. He thought he detected in her fingers a returning warmth of grasp.

"They are here," announced Mrs. Joyce, after some ten minutes of silence.

"Who are here?" asked Bartol.

"My band—and many others."

"How can you tell?"

"I hear them." A faint whisper soon distinguished itself, and Mrs. Joyce reported that Mr. Blodgett was speaking. "He says he realizes the importance of this test, and that he has summoned all the most powerful of the spirits within reach, and that they will do all they can. He says the wire cage is a new condition, but they will meet it. Be patient; the strain on Lucy is very great, but it cannot be avoided."

In the silence which followed this conversation Leo shuddered and clutched Victor's hand as if for protection. "The other world is opening. Don't

you feel it?" She whispered. "I can hear the rustle of wings."

He, growing very tense himself, answered: "I feel only my mother's anxiety. Are you comfortable, mother?" he asked.

She did not reply, and Mrs. Joyce said, "She is asleep." And all became silent again.

"Hello!" exclaimed Stinchfield. "Who touched me?"

"No one in the circle," answered Mrs. Joyce, highly elated.

"I certainly felt a hand on my shoulder—there it comes again! Shall I flash my camera?"

"*Not now!*" came a clear, full whisper, apparently from the cabinet. "*You would fail now. Wait.*"

"Who spoke?" asked Bartol.

As there was no reply, Mrs. Joyce asked, "Is it you, Mr. Blodgett?"

"*No!*" the whisper replied.

"Is it Watts?"

"*Yes.*"

"It is Isaac Watts. Now it is his science against yours, Mr. Stinchfield."

Bartol fell into the mode at once. "We are glad to be so honored. Now Watts, I want—and I must have—incontestable proof of the psychic's abnormal power—nothing else can save her from State prison. Do you realize that?"

"*We do.*"

"Very well, proceed."

"*What would you call incontestable proof?*"

"I should say a registered pressure on the key or the lighting of the lamp above the cabinet—"

A vivid red flash lit up the room. Stinchfield shouted, "The lamp—the lamp was lit!"

His excitement, to all but Bartol, was ludicrously high, and Mrs. Joyce openly chuckled. "What else do you want done, Mr. Science?"

"Writing independent of Mrs. Ollnee," replied Bartol.

After a long and painful silence the bell tinkled faintly, and as all listened breathlessly the zither began to play.

"Now who is doing that?" asked the engineer.

"*Turn on the green light!*" suggested the Voice.

Stinchfield lit the green lamp, and by its glow the psychic was seen in her cage reclining limply, her face ghostly white in the light. Bartol looked about the circle. Every hand was in view, and yet the zither continued to play its weird and wistful little tune. Leo and Mrs. Joyce took this as a matter of course, but the men sat in rigid amazement.

"*Lights out!*" whispered the Voice.

Stinchfield put out his lamp. "That is astounding," he said. "I cannot analyze that."

"*Will you swear the psychic did not do it?*" asked the Voice.

The engineer hesitated. "Yes," he finally said.

"*Is this sufficient?*" asked the unseen.

Bartol replied. "Sufficient for my argument; but I do not understand these physical effects, and the jury may demand other proof. It will be necessary for us to show that the messages which misled, as well as those which comforted, came from some power outside the psychic and beyond her control. I believe that, as in the case of Anna Rothe—condemned by a German court to a long term of imprisonment—the charge of imposture and swindling made against Mrs. Ollnee must lie, unless I can demonstrate that these messages come from her subconscious self in some occult way, or from personalities other than herself. In fact, the whole case against Mrs. Ollnee lies in the question—does she believe in The Voices as entities existing and acting outside herself—"

He interrupted himself to say: "Something is tapping my hand. It feels like the small tin horn."

"*It is!*" came the answer in such volume that it could be heard all over the room.

"*Does this not prove the medium innocent of ventriloquism?*"

"Stinchfield—what about this?" asked Bartol.

The engineer could only repeat: "I don't understand it. It is out of my range."

Again the red lamp above the cabinet flashed, and by its momentary glow the horn was seen floating high over the cage, in which the medium sat motionless and ghastly white.

"Shall I flashlight that?" asked Stinchfield again.

"*No,*" answered the Voice. "*The flashlight is very dangerous. We must use it only for the supreme thing. Be patient!*"

There was no longer any spirit of jocularity in the room. Each one acknowledged the presence of something profoundly mysterious, something capable of transforming physical science from top to bottom, something so far-reaching in its effect on law and morals as to benumb the faculties of those who perceived it. It was in no sense a religious awe with Bartol; it was the humbleness which comes to the greatest minds as they confront the unknowable deeps of matter and of space.

The boy and girl forgot their names, their sex. They touched hands as two infinitely small insects mght do in the impenetrable night of their world (their hates as unimportant as their loves). Only the bereaved wife and mother leaned forward with the believer's full faith in the heaven from which the beloved forms of her dead were about to issue.

Suddenly the curtains of the alcove opened, disclosing a narrow strip of some glowing white substance. It was not metal, and it was not drapery. It was something not classified in science, and Stinchfield stared at it with analytic eyes, talking under breath to Bartol. "It is not phosphorus, but like it. I wonder if it emits heat?"

Mrs. Joyce explained: "It is the half-opened door into the celestial plane. I saw a face looking out."

This light vanished as silently as it came, and the zither began to play again, and a multitude of fairy voices—like a splendid chorus heard far down a shining hall—sang exquisitely but sadly an unknown anthem. While still the men of law and science listened in stupefaction the voices died out, and the zither, still playing, rose in the air, and at the instant when it was sounding nearest the ceiling the red lamp above the cabinet was again lighted, and the instrument, played by two faintly perceived hands, continued floating in the air.

Silent, open-mouthed, staring, Stinchfield heard the zither descend to the table before him. Then he awoke. "I must photograph *that!*"

"*Not yet,*" insisted the Voice. "*Wait for a more important sign.*"

In Victor's mind a complete revulsion to faith had come. His heart went out in a rush of remorseful tenderness and awe. The last lingering doubt of his mother disappeared. Like a flash of lightning memory swept back over his past. All he had seen and heard of the "ghost-room" stood revealed in a pure white light. "*It was all true—all of it. She has never deceived me or any one else; she is wonderful and pure as an angel!*" Incredible as were the effects he had seen, and which he had rejected as unconscious

trickery, not one of them was more destructive of the teaching of his books than this vision of the zither played high in the air by sad, sweet hands. He longed to clasp his mother to his bosom to ask her forgiveness, but his throat choked with an emotion he could not utter.

Bartol, with tense voice, said to Stinchfield: "We have succeeded in paralleling Crookes' experiment. With this alone I can save her."

The flash of radiance from the cabinet interrupted him, and a new voice—an imperative voice—called:

"*Green light!*"

Stinchfield turned his switch, and there in the glow of the lamp stood a tall female figure with pale, sweet, oval face and dark, mysterious eyes.

"It is Altair!" exclaimed Leo.

Victor shivered with awe and exalted admiration, for the eyes seemed to look straight at him. The room was filled with that familiar unaccountable odor, and a cold wind blew as before from the celestial visitant, with suggestions of limitless space and cold, white light.

"*Be faithful,*" the sweet Voice said. "*Do not grieve. Do your work. Good-by.*"

The vision lasted but an instant, but in that moment Stinchfield and Bartol both perceived the psychic in her electric prison, lying like a corpse with lolling head and ghostly, sunken cheeks. She seemed to have lost half her bulk; like a partly filled garment she draped her chair.

The engineer spoke in a voice soft, pleading, husky with excitement. "May I flashlight now?"

"*Not that—but this!*" uttered a man's voice, and forth from the cabinet a faintly luminous mist appeared.

"*Red lamp!*"

In the glow of the sixteen-candle-power light the face of a bearded man was plainly seen. It wore a look of grave expectancy.

"Shall I fire?" asked Stinchfield.

"*It may destroy our instrument,*" answered the figure. "*But proceed.*"

The blinding flash which followed was accompanied by a cry, followed by a moan, and Lucy Ollnee was heard to topple from her chair to the floor. In the moment of horrified silence which followed the Voice commanded:

"*Be silent! Do not stir! Turn off your current.*"

In his excitement Stinchfield turned off both light and current, and left the whole room in darkness. Victor was on his feet crying out: "She has fallen! She is dying!"

"*Stay where you are, my son. Keep the room dark. We will take care of your mother.*"

So absolute was his faith at the moment, Victor resumed his seat, though he was trembling with fear. Leo reached for his hand. "Don't be frightened. They will care for her."

"We have witnessed the miraculous," de-

clared Bartol, stricken into irresolution by what had taken place.

Mrs. Joyce, accustomed to these marvels, added her word of warning. "Don't go to her yet. Spirits are all about her. It has been a terrible shock, but they will heal her."

Stunned silent, baffled by what he had seen, the scientist sat with his hand on the switches controlling the lights ready to carry out the orders of his invisible colleague.

"*Red light!*" commanded the Voice. "*Approach—quietly. Victor, take charge of your mother's body. She will not re-enter it. Her spirit is with us.*"

Victor went forward and knelt in agony while the engineer lifted the cage and delivered the unconscious psychic into his hands.

Lucy Ollnee breathed no more. She had died as she had lived, a martyr to the unseen world.

But her death was triumphant, for on the sensitive plate of each camera science and law were able to read the proof of her power. In the dark face of his grandsire Victor read a stern contempt as though he said:

"Deny and still deny. In the end you *must* believe."

In the alcove on the pad these words were written in his mother's hand: "*Do not grieve. My work is done. I do not go far. I shall be near to cheer and guide you. Your future is*

secure. Work hard, be patient, and all will be well. Farewell, but not good-by."

Below, written in the quaint script which Victor recognized, were these words: "*Men of science and of law, blazon forth the marvels you have seen and tested. Make the world ring with them; in such wise will you advance veneration for God and remove the fear of death.*

"*WATTS.*"

XV

THE RING

BARTOL obeyed the command of the invisible powers. He gladly blazoned the triumphant death of the psychic to the world. Lucy Ollnee became at once a glorious martyr for her faith, a victim of science. Liberal journals and religious journals alike lamented that it was necessary for the sake of proof as regards immortality "that an innocent woman should be caged and tortured to death with electric batteries," and even the *Star*, leader in the war against the mediums, permitted itself an editorial word of regret, and published in full Bartol's letter, and also a long interview with Stinchfield, wherein he admitted the genuineness of the dead woman's claims to supra-normal power.

But all this was, at the moment, of small comfort to Victor. For a long time he refused to believe in the reality of his mother's death, insisting that she was in deep trance (as she had been before); but at last, when the body was to be removed to Mrs. Joyce's home and Doctor Steele and Doctor Eberly had both examined it

and found no signs of life, he gave up all hope of her return.

Accompanied by Mrs. Joyce, he visited the California Avenue flat for the last time to pack up the few things of value which his mother had been permitted to acquire. His attitude toward the chairs, the slates, the old table, had utterly changed. They were now instinct with his mother's power, permeated with some part of her subtler material self, and he was minded to preserve them. They were no longer the tools of a conjuror; they were the sacred relics of a priestess.

Mrs. Joyce asked permission to house them for him till he had secured a home of his own, and to this he consented, for with his present feeling concerning them he was troubled by the thought of their being stored in dark vaults among masses of commonplace furniture.

"I shall keep the table in my own room," said Mrs. Joyce. "It may be that Lucy will be able to manifest herself to me through it. I have been promised such power."

To this Victor made no reply, for while he now believed absolutely in all that his mother claimed to do, he had not been brought to a belief in the return of the dead, and it was this fundamental doubt which made his grief so bitter. "If only she could know that I believe in her," he said to Leo, on the morning of the day when his mother's body was to be taken away. "Think of it!

She died a thousand times for the curious and the selfish, only to be called an impostor and a cheat—and I, her only son, was afraid the charge was true. If only I could have told her that I believed in her!"

"She knows," the girl gently assured him. They were seated at the moment in the library and the morning was very warm and silent. The birds seemed to be resting in preparation for their evensong. "Your mother is near us—she may be listening to us this minute."

"I can't believe that," he declared, sadly. "I'm not sure that I want to believe it. I can't endure the thought of my mother's destruction, and yet the notion of her floating about somewhere like a wreath of mist is sorrowful to me."

Leo confessed to somewhat the same feeling. "Heaven—any kind of heaven—has always been incomprehensible to me, and yet we must believe there is some sort of system of rewards and punishments. Anyhow, your mother's death was glorious. She died as she would have wished to die—in proving her faith."

"She gave too much," he protested. "All her life she was set apart to do a martyr's work. I understand now why my father couldn't stand it. I know how he must have resented these Voices, and I cannot blame him for going away. Would you marry a man like Stainton Moses or David Home?"

She recoiled a little before the thought. "Of course not—but—"

"What?"

"Your mother was charming. If your father really loved her—"

"He did! I'm sure of that, at first, but these 'ghosts' destroyed his home. My mother confessed to me that they tormented my father for his unbelief, and he had to go."

"They are together now, and he believes."

Victor fixed a penetrating look upon her. "Do you really believe that the dead speak to us?"

"I see no reason whey they shouldn't—if they want to. How else can you explain these Voices?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid these modern Italian scientists are right. The Voices were only 'parasitic personalities,' nothing else. But let's not talk of them. I'm tired of the 'ghost-room'—all my life I've had it—and now I'm going to forget it if I can."

"Hush! Your mother may hear you and grieve."

"If she can hear me she will understand my feeling. I like the world as it is—I don't want the supernatural thrust into it."

"I think you're wrong," she said, firmly. "The larger view is that of the scientist who recognizes nothing supernatural in the universe. I would not part with what your mother

gave me for huge sums. I've had wonderful, thrilling experiences. Remember Altair!"

Altair! Yes, he remembered her, and remembering her he recalled the graceful figure at his bedside and the touch of the faintly clinging lips. That mystery remained the most inexplicable of them all.

While thus he sat, dream-filled and rapt, the girl studied him, and her face changed. "You believe in Altair. What's more, you love her, and I can't blame you for it. She is more beautiful than angels. You will not forsake the 'ghost-room' so long as you have a hope that she may return."

"You are mistaken," he protested. "Altair is only a dream. I worship her as a figure in a vision. Do you know what I think she was?" Her look questioned, and he went on. "For days I have pondered on her face and figure, in the light of modern science, and I am convinced that she was nothing but a union of my mother's astral self and you."

She looked at him in startled thought. "What do you mean?"

He explained eagerly. "You must have noticed how much like my mother she was? Her brow was the same—her eyes the same—"

"Yes, they were a little like hers."

"But her mouth and chin were exactly like yours. Her hands were like yours. She held her head exactly as you do—and then she

changed; sometimes my mother predominated in her, sometimes you were the stronger."

The girl was deeply affected by the significance of this analysis. "You imagined all that."

He pushed on. "I did not, and, furthermore, Altair never came till you sat with my mother. She never attained such power—so your aunt agrees—till I came into the circle. She represented my conception of my mother and you. I loved my mother, and I admired you—and out of my love and admiration Altair was created."

"That is absurd! If ever a spirit came from heaven, Altair was that one. Why, she was palpable! I've touched her hands."

He said, slowly: "She was beautiful, I confess, so beautiful that on that first night she made even you seem coarse and material."

"I felt your disdain," she thrust in, with sudden hurt.

"But that was only for the moment. I could see nothing but her face—so sad, so wistful. But let me ask you something. Did you, the night after our walk on the drive in the moonlight—did you dream of me?"

Her lip curled in a wondering smile. "What a question to ask of me!"

"But did you? Come now, be honest. I have a reason for asking—did you?"

"What is your reason for asking?"

"That night Altair came to my bedside."

Her eyes flashed and she rose to her feet. "You have an Oriental imagination."

"Don't go—hear me out. It was a beautiful experience."

"Apparently it was. To me your story is insulting."

He lost patience a little, and said bluntly: "You act as if I charged *you* with something. I say, 'Altair' came, and to me her visit was very *significant* and beautiful, because she testified to me that both you and my mother were thinking of me. It was, in fact, your united astral selves that paid that visit. Altair was your materialized friendship and my mother's love."

"What a fantastic notion!" she said; but she lingered, held by something new and masterful in his voice.

She added, with some humor: "Be kind enough to imagine that your mother's 'astral self' preponderated in that vision."

"I do, for when Altair stooped to kiss me—"

"Stop!" she cried out, sharply; "you go too far!"

"Leo!" he called, and his voice checked her as quickly as if he had caught her by the arm. "I am not joking; I am very serious. You must remember that I have lost both my mother and Altair—you alone remain—I can't afford to lose you. You are all I have now. Don't be angry with me."

She considered him with a return to pity.

"Forgive me," she hurriedly retracted. "I am very sorry for you, and I don't want to seem unfriendly; but it is only a week since we met. What can you know of me in so short a time?"

"I loved you the moment you came into my mother's room."

"Nonsense. You hated me."

"I did not like the way you treated me; but I never hated you. I was afraid of you."

"If your mother can hear you say that, she is certainly smiling, for she knows you are not afraid of anybody. You're a very stiff-necked person."

"I know you have a right to laugh at me; but I believe our 'guides' have brought us together. I need you—now—and if I dared I'd ask you to wear this." He disclosed a ring in his hand.

She looked at it narrowly. "I know that ring; it was your mother's. She kept it in a little velvet box together with an old-fashioned locket."

"Yes, it is hers. It isn't very grand, compared with your own, but I wish you'd put it on and consider it my promissory note."

"*Your* promissory note!"

"Yes, I promise to buy it back with all the money you have lost through my mother's advice. Will you wear it for me?"

"Where do you expect to find so much money?"

"Right here, in this great city. Mr. Bartol is to take me into his office. He's like a father to me already; but I don't expect him to give me anything. I'm going to work, and I'm going to pay you back the money you have lost."

Extending her little finger, she took the ring daintily on its tip. "All that sounds very romantic; and yet young men do win wealth and fame right here—and why not you?"

"That's just it. I may be the future monopolizer of air-ships—" The maid, appearing at the moment, announced that a lady wished to see Mr. Ollnee.

"Did she give her name?"

"No, sir; but she said she was a relative, sir."

"Tell her I will see her in a moment."

As the maid left Leo rose.

"Don't go!" pleaded Victor. "My visitor can wait. You haven't said whether you will wear my ring or not. I don't know how long it may be before I can 'make good,' but it will help mightily to know that you are expecting me to do so."

She pondered, but her face was kindly and her voice very gentle as she said: "I don't want to seem unkind now in your hour of grief, but I can't wear the ring." His eyes filled with tears, and she added: "I'll keep it for you. The real question between us will have to be decided some time in the future—when we know each other better. You need not think of paying

me. Go and see your relation. It may be a rich aunt come to adopt you."

"Couldn't you *learn* to love me?" he asked, poignantly.

"I might." She smiled. "I like you already." And she went away, leaving him with stronger will to dare and do.

XVI

CONCLUSION

AS Victor entered the library he was met by a very pale, wide-eyed young woman in a picturesque black hat. Her voice was deep and full of dramatic fervor as she said:

"You are Victor Ollnee?"

"I am."

Her eyes, large and very dark, almost black, gazed at him appealingly, as she said: "Pardon me for a little deception. I am your relation only in a spiritual sense—I share your sorrow, and in other ways I am related to you. I was eager to see you, and I did not send in my name for the reason that it would have repelled you, and you might have refused to meet me."

Victor thought her a very singular and very theatric young person. Certainly she was under some strong stress of emotion which caused her lips to quiver and her voice to vibrate tensely. He knew her now. She was the girl he had confronted in the court-room, and he stared at her, uncertain of his footing. She seemed like some of the figures he had seen on the stage, vivid, swift

of change, unreal, but her voice was vibrantly charming. He was sure she was the girl he had met on the street, and she had stood beside the man Aiken during their brief appearance in the court-room.

She approached a step or two, as if throwing herself on his mercy. "My name is Florence Aiken. I am a newspaper writer. I am the one who brought all this trouble to you. It was I who wrote that first article in the *Star* denouncing your mother."

He recoiled before her quite as dramatically as she could have wished. "You wrote that!" he exclaimed. "I thought a man did that job."

She could not help a slight expression of pride in her work. "It was mine, every word of it. I was terribly vindictive, I admit; but you must know I had some provocation. Let me tell you? Will you listen to me? Please do! I'm not so heartless as I seemed in that article, and I cannot rest till I have made my peace with you."

Her voice, her pale face, her intense eyes, and her tense contralto voice softened his resentment.

"I'll listen, but you can't expect me to forgive a thing like that."

"May I sit?"

"Certainly," he answered, but remained standing, as if to retain his guard.

"Don't condemn me altogether," she pleaded. "Wait till you know how much reason I had to hate the whole brood of clairvoyants, seers, and

psychics. My dear old grandmother was an easy mark for the cheapest of them, and I, who paid for her nurse out of my own thin little purse, and waited upon her night and day, had a right to consider her small fortune my own. It wasn't much, but it was enough to pay the cost of a flat, and to see it all going to fakers and greasy palmists—well, it was too much. It made a crusader of me—and it would have made one of you. It was not a question of your mother—alone. I went to our managing editor at last, and told him my story. I made it clear to him that the city was full of these harpies who prey on poor old women like my grandmother. 'They ought to be driven out of town,' I said. 'Cut loose,' he said; and I did. My article on your mother was honest. I believed her to be simply another one of the same sort of impostors. I took her just like three or four others whose methods I knew, and I got my cousin, Frank Aiken, to bring suit against her. I thought she was a crook. I feel differently to-day. Since talking with Judge Bartol and Mr. Stinchfield (I handled both those assignments) I've changed my estimate of her. I have written a page article vindicating her. I've come to tell you that her death in that cage has changed the situation for me. I am convinced that she was sincere, and I want to humble myself before you, her son, and ask your forgiveness. I know you feel more like killing me, but here I am—I

couldn't rest without letting you know that I need your pardon."

Her plea, swift, voiced in music, and illustrated by her pale face, glowing eyes, and sensitive lips, powerfully affected him. He towered over her in savage silence for a little while, then with effort he said: "I don't see how I can do anything to you, for I felt the same way—I mean I didn't believe in my mother's business."

She became radiant. "Didn't you?"

"No. Up to the very moment when that red lamp was lit I could not believe in her. I couldn't help doubting—even now I need the photographs to bolster up my belief."

The reportorial instinct awoke in her. "I wish I might see those photographs—to reassure myself, not for publication. May I see them?"

He did not observe that her desire for his pardon seemed suddenly to be met, even though he had not yet put it in words, and his mind was wholly on the question of the photographic tests as he slowly replied:

"They are very marvelous—especially those which came on the unexposed plates."

Her eyes widened in wonder. "What do you mean?"

"Mr. Stinchfield had several packages of plates opened ready to use in his cameras, but The Voices only let him make one flashlight. It seems as if they knew the experiment would end my mother's life, and yet on each of the unex-

posed plates are faces and forms, some of which Mr. Bartol 'recognized.'"

"Let me see them—please!" she pleaded, earnestly. "They will comfort me, too, for I am under conviction."

He took from his pocket a package of small photographs. "Here," he said, "are the three flashlights of my grandfather, Nelson Blodgett."

The young woman almost snatched them in her eager haste. "Oh, wonderful! What a document! The medium plainly in her cage—and this figure on the same plate."

"It is the most convincing picture in existence," he said, sadly, "but it cost me my mother."

She fixed a dreamy gaze upon him. "If this is a spirit—then your mother can return to you. Has she done so?"

He moved uneasily. "I have not asked her to do that. I don't care to be controlled or guided by spirits, not even by her spirit."

"Why?"

His voice was firm and assured as he replied: "Because I want to live and work out my career like other men. I don't want to see or hear any more of the 'astral plane'—" He checked himself. "It isn't natural for a man like me to be mixed up with all this spirit business, and I'm tired of it."

"I see what you mean. You want to work and woo and marry like other men. You're

right; of course you're right. What have we who are young and vigorous to do with the dead, anyway? Unless all human life is a mistake, a foolish thing, it's our business to live it humanly." She held out her hand for the other pictures. "Let me see them all, please!"

He handed them to her. "There were three cameras," he explained, "hence these duplicates. These faces are likenesses of Mr. Bartol's wife and two children—and these plates, remember, were not exposed—they are of Altair, one of the guides."

She studied the shadowy forms with keen gaze. "One of the strange things about this 'spirit photograph' business is the resemblance they all bear to pictures—I mean, they all look as if they were photographs of framed portraits or drawings."

Again he betrayed restlessness. "Mr. Stinchfield noticed that."

"What is his explanation?"

"He does not think they come from spirits at all."

She urged him to unbosom himself. "You have a conviction? What is it?"

"His theory is that they are only mental images transferred by some unknown mental power to the plates."

"What about the figure of your grandsire?"

"His theory is that the figure was really the

etheric self of my mother—shaped to the form like my grandsire by her own mind."

She stared at him. "And you accept that?"

"I don't know what else to believe. Yes, I accept that. I don't believe the dead have any right to talk and fool with the lives of the living the way I've been fooled with and side-tracked." His voice was full of fervor now. "I'm going to live my own life hereafter irrespective of the dead—responsible only to the living. I will not be disciplined by ghosts."

The girl laid the photographs down softly and looked at him with frank admiration. "You're a very extraordinary young man," she said, sagely.

"No, I'm not!" he protested. "I'm just a good average. A week ago my hottest ambition was to carry the Winona ball team to victory. If I had the money and the courage I'd go back there to-morrow and finish my course."

"What do you mean by courage?"

"Well, you know what I'd be loaded up with. To go back there now would be the devil and all. Your article broke my peaceful combination just a week ago last Sunday."

"But I have undone my work. I have vindicated your mother. You have a right to be proud of her. She was as real a martyr as ever went to the stake."

"I know, but I'll be a marked figure, all the same."

"You were a marked figure before. But consider all explanations have been made—wait till you read my article. Go back!" she insisted. "I wish you would." Her voice was rich with pleading. "It would make me happy. I feel horribly guilty—really I do. I'm only a grubbing reporter-person—I've had to earn my way and keep house for my grandmother besides; but I'd gladly share my salary to help you return to college. Please go back—it will relieve my mind of a big burden."

He took her hand in the spirit in which it was offered. "I am within a few days of graduation, but—"

"Please go back—for the sake of a poor little newspaper wretch who feels that she has indirectly spoiled your career. She pressed his hand fervidly. "Promise me this and you'll take a monstrous load off my shoulders."

She had the face, the temperament of the actress, and loved to experiment on the hearts of men; but she was deeply in earnest now. Bartol and Stinchfield had really changed her point of view as regards Mrs. Ollnee, and this "situation" appealed to her at the moment with irresistible power. Life was to her a drama, intense, never-ending, romantic, and at the moment she loved this splendid young man orphaned by her hand.

He could not resist her caressing voice, her

appealing eyes, her sensitive lips, and he said, "I promise."

"Thank you," she said, and, dropping his hand, she lifted burning yet tearful eyes to his face. "You are very generous."

He went on, "I am sure you meant well."

"I don't want to rest under false imputations," she repeated. "I did not mean well. That first article was savage. I was angry. I struck blindly, but I struck to hurt."

"Well, all that is ended," he replied, sadly. "My mother is to be buried to-day."

She looked at him in silence for a moment. "I have one more request to make," she said, at last, and her voice was very soft and hesitating. "I'd like to look upon her face. I want to ask her forgiveness."

His heart melted at this plea, and he turned away to hide his tears. When he could speak he said: "She is very beautiful. I cannot believe even now that she is dead; but I have given my consent to have her taken to the cemetery. I will show her to you."

In silence she followed him up the stairway and into the cool, dark room where the coffin lay.

The windows were open at the bottom, and though the shades were drawn, the chamber was filled with soft light. The cries of the barn-yard and the twitter of birds outside seemed strangely softened as the two young people so singularly

brought together approached the still form of the seeress and looked into her face serene with the infinite repose of death.

Victor, with choking throat and burning eyes, stood at the bier unable to utter a sound; but the girl, after a long glance, took a rose from her bosom, and, with a sigh, gently laid it on the still, small, white hands of the silent form.

"Accept my homage," she intoned, softly, "and if you can still see and hear, pardon me and forget my bitter words."

She stood a moment thereafter as if involuntarily listening, waiting, hoping—but the dead gave no sign.

THE END

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